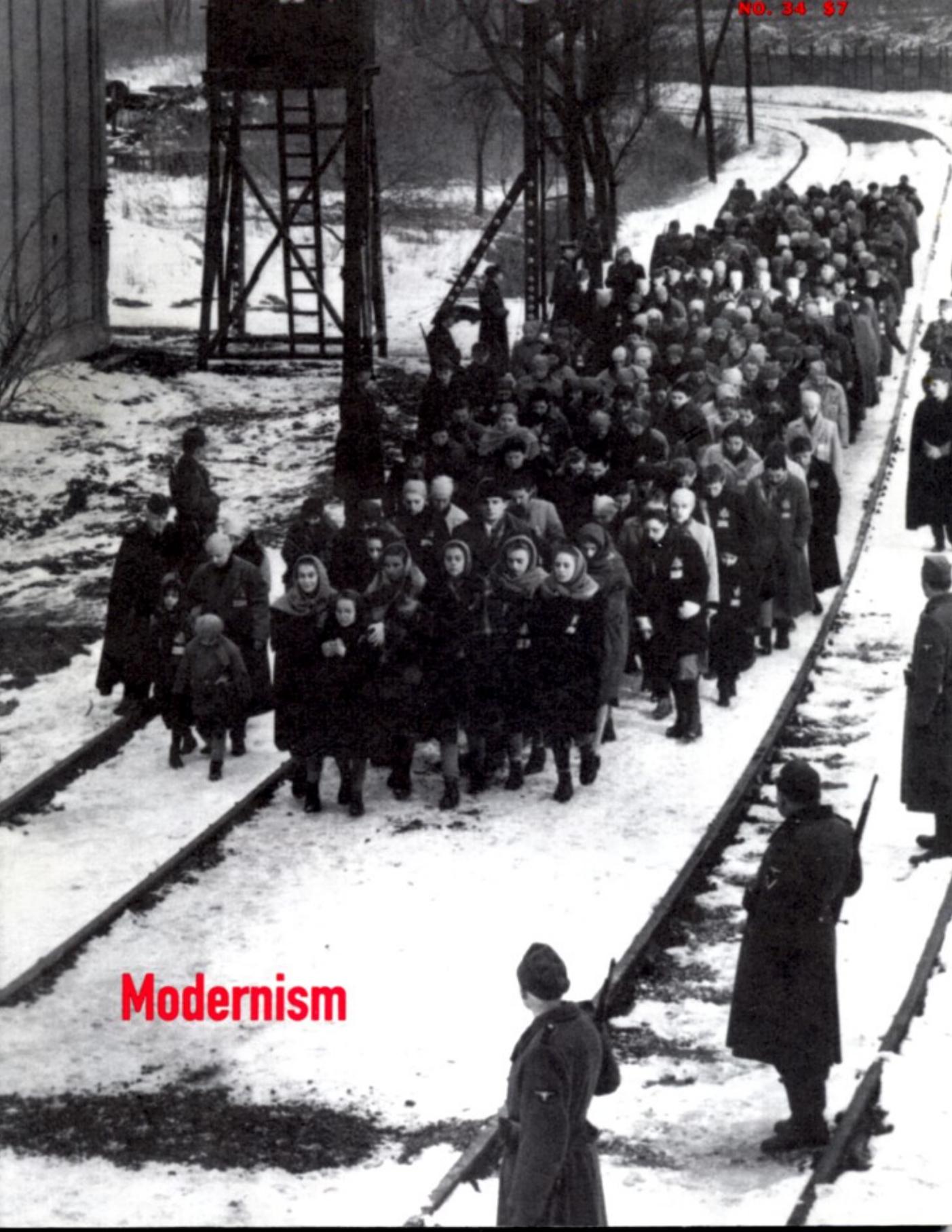


# cineACTION

NO. 34 \$7



Modernism

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## cineACTION

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*CineAction* is published three times a year by the *CineAction* collective.

Single copy \$7.

Subscriptions:

Canada and U.S.:  
(individual) 3 issues/\$18  
(institutions) 3 issues/\$35

Overseas add \$15

Mailing Address:

40 Alexander Street Suite 705  
Toronto, Canada M4Y 1B5

Manuscripts (typed, double spaced) are welcomed. They should be accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed return envelope. The editors do not accept responsibility for their loss.

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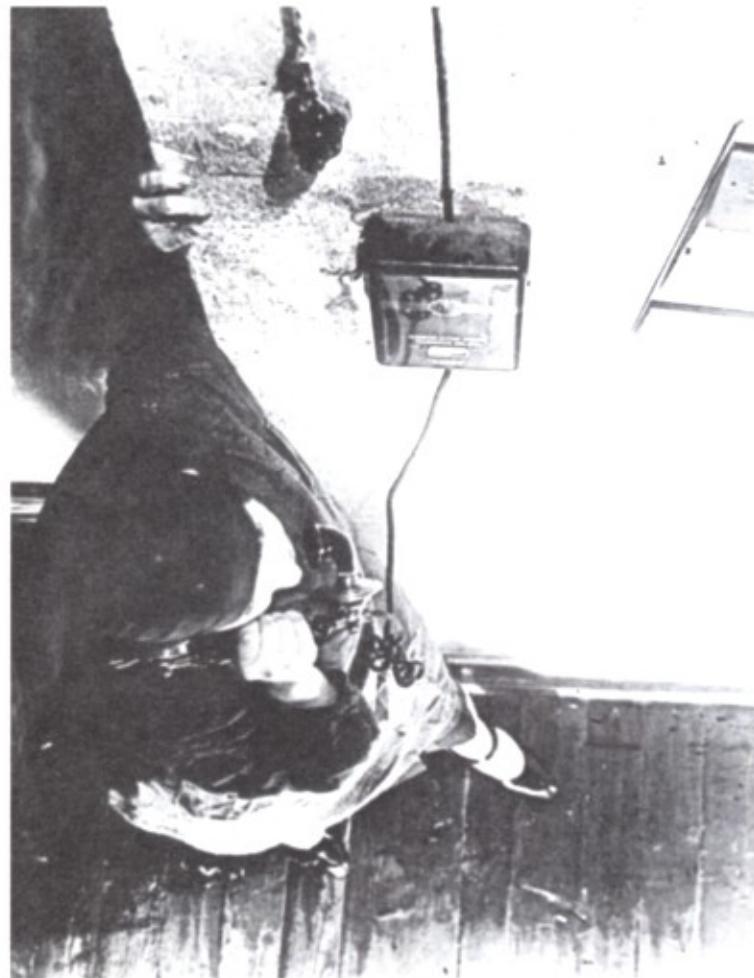
We would like to thank the Ontario Arts Council, the Ontario Publishing Centre and The Canada Council for their generous support.

*CineAction* is owned and operated by *CineAction*, a collective for the advancement of film studies. *CineAction* is a non-profit organization.

ISSN 0826-9866

Printed and bound in Canada

## On Modernism



Rodchenko, "At the Telephone," 1923.

At this point in time, almost midway through the nineties, we find ourselves dissatisfied with the path postmodernist critique has taken. We strongly believe modernism was too summarily dismissed. While we agree that some of the more hermetic aspects of late modernism, especially those which privileged form over content, led to a dead end, so has postmodernism, and for much the same reason.

What we see worth retrieving from modernist practice is its energy and vitality dedicated to the possibility of social and political change. A politicized modernism can restore the importance of content to form, thereby offering a way out of the exhaustion brought about by passive submission to the postmodern apocalypse. Modernism doesn't deny the traumatic events of the past 50 years that have left an indelible mark on our collective consciousness; its commitment, however, is to active engagement and continued resistance.

We see this issue as a first step towards such a rethinking of modernism.

Florence Jacobowitz &  
Susan Morrison



## For Andrew Britton: A Personal Tribute

Andrew died of AIDS on Easter Sunday of this year; he was in his early forties.

I first met Andrew when I was teaching at the University of Warwick in England. He applied to do an M.A. in Film Study under me, this being at the time the only autonomous film department in a British university. He was very shy and awkward, and it took me all of two weeks to recognize that my new student possessed an intellectual grasp incomparably superior to my own. So, very swiftly, my student became my mentor, and transformed my whole attitude to the cinema and to society. I learned so much more from him than he ever did from me. For a few years I virtually gave up writing: it seemed obvious to me that Andrew would do everything I wanted to do, and do it far better. I might, I suppose, have resented this if he hadn't been also so sweet, so gentle, so diffident, so lovable, and so supportive of me.

For me, Andrew was, and remains, quite simply the finest writer on film in the English language to date. If one thinks of a writer's achievement in terms of bulk, then one must say that his potential was never fully realized, the books he planned never written. Yet in a sense it is all there in what he gave us: a body of work, though dispersed among a number of magazines of somewhat limited accessibility (*Framework*, *Movie*, *The Australian Journal of Film Theory*, *CineAction*) of rare distinction, integrity and generosity, of quite sufficient substance for the reader of insight and imagination to infer what might have been achieved under more auspicious circumstances (and I refer there not only to AIDS). Everything he wrote was about so much more than its ostensible subject, the range of reference and suggestion moving constantly outwards through the culture, demonstrating again and again that to write seriously about film is to write about our civilization, both its history and its present. Hence I can say, without exaggeration, that Andrew's book on Katharine Hepburn (the only book completed of the many he projected) so far transcends the customary "star" study as to be the finest book on the Hollywood cinema that I have ever read. And his articles in *CineAction* represent, in my opinion, easily the most distinguished work we have had the honour of publishing. Every issue in which it appeared deserves to become a collector's item.

Andrew's last years were passed in bitterness, poverty and increasing isolation: with a kind of angry pride he dissociated himself systematically from most of the people to whom he had been close. The tendency began, however, before the disease manifested itself. Andrew never received the recognition that his work so obviously and so richly deserved, and he was painfully aware of this. He was always so damned *inconvenient*. He never "belonged," never joined the current academic club to participate uncritically and opportunistically in the latest "-ism." One simply cannot imagine him scurrying around from conference to conference delivering ephemeral "learned papers" that said what everyone wanted to hear at the time, in order to impress influential people and get a few more entries on this resumé. Andrew thought, worked and lived on a level far beyond that on which university careers today flourish. Everything he wrote can stand as a model of independent thinking, and the academic mentality cannot tolerate incompatibility: the "club" has strict rules for membership, an unquestioning allegiance to the current "correctness" being the first commandment. His *CineAction* articles on Postmodernism and what one may call David Bordwellism have never been convincingly refuted (in most cases they have simply been ignored) and one has to assume they *can't* be. So the strategy has been to preserve a silence, to pretend they don't exist. Yet he was a magnificent teacher, and he loved to teach—he longed for a university appointment, and a security within which he could both teach and write his books. But the ethos of the contemporary university (and where else can we now look for the nurturing of independent thought?), with its obsession with "the latest," its mutual back-slapping club mentality, could not contain Andrew—to both its and his and our great cost. His last years were lived in progressive disillusionment and discouragement, which took their toll, doubtless significantly hastening the ravages of the disease. In his final year he at last found a congenial academic environment, teaching with Douglas Pye at Reading University in England. But it was too late. It is not only AIDS but the contemporary university mentality that has deprived us of the books he wanted to write. They would have represented an inestimable step forward in our understanding of the cinema and our culture.

by Robin Wood

## For Andrew Britton 1951-1994

We were very grateful to have had Andrew Britton on the *CineAction* collective for a number of years. His work was always original, audacious and creative; it consistently opened up new directions and spaces providing a challenge to investigate the value and validity of current scholarship and thinking. Andrew's theoretical and critical thinking remains relevant because it contains far-reaching insights and ideas. His work never depended on current trends and he put forth his position with provocative and well-grounded arguments. We admired Andrew's commitment to and defense of the notion that the mainstream cinema, particularly Hollywood in its classical era, could produce radical work which addressed various forms of social contradiction and oppression and did so without relinquishing the kinds of pleasure popular art can offer. Andrew's critical position was couched in his political concerns and commitment to envisioning a more equitable world. On the other hand, he wasn't swayed by the pressure to be 'politically correct' and he wouldn't kowtow to the academic establishment. He stood by his principles tenaciously, even when he knew that on a professional basis they might isolate him and undermine his advancement.

Andrew was a dear friend and gave us much to remember. Conversations with Andrew were marked by his wry wit, charm and unfailing perception and intelligence. In commemoration, we are featuring stills from several films he greatly admired and which gave him much pleasure.

by Florence Jacobowitz  
and Richard Lippe



top: "Now Voyager," centre: "Marnie," bottom: "Bringing Up Baby."



Schindler's List

# Rethinking History Through Narrative Art

Florence  
Jacobowitz

Since then, at an uncertain hour,  
That agony returns,  
And till my ghostly tale is told  
This heart within me burns.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge,  
*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* xv, 582 -85  
from: Primo Levi: *The Drowned and the Saved*

There has emerged a growing body of art, disseminated through the centre and edges of mainstream distribution, which rethinks history through biography, narrative and the personal voice. These works share a number of characteristics, and challenge the kinds of categories within which one tends to insert and codify art. They freely mix fictional modes, generic conventions, the structure of narratives, subjective memory with documented facts and witnessed testimony, to re-imagine and reconstruct authentic historical stories in a manner far removed from what one conceives to be objective 'rational' historiographic practices. This art insists that personal 'domestic' politics is rooted within broader social determinants; that one's identity and sense of self is profoundly informed by historical legacies, inherited familiarly, nationally, and culturally. Most important, this practice of rethinking history personally and experientially leads one to the conclusion that each of us remains accountable, individually and communally, for the way we use history to acknowledge our social responsibilities presently and in the future. The implications recommend that we are responsible for informed intervention. There exists a sense of agency, of purpose underlying these projects that forms their pulse and heartbeat.

I will discuss a few of these works which address history through memory and forms of narrative fiction. For the purpose of focus (and drawing from my own experience and interest) I have chosen a number of exemplary works which address the events and ramifications of National Socialist Germany, of collaborationist Vichy France, of Auschwitz, of the systematic, industrialized slaughter which took place over relatively few years, aided and abetted by the indifference or complicity of a host of nations. These events continue to demand attention because of the nature and complexity of the government sanctioned crimes, aimed at the eradication of difference in terms of race, sexual orientation, political beliefs (in alternative political systems, in women's rights) and even cultural manifestations: they were so inconceivably new and outside of the realm of experience and imagination that they evoked a new category of legal culpability: crimes against humanity. The



*Schindler's List*

extensive crimes perpetrated by Nazi Germany and its satellite occupations with the support of a variety of countries demand a response of continued testimony because they were carried out, to a large extent, through a policy of erasure, under a veil of denial, evasion, suppression and the practice of destroying evidence. The perpetrators depended on the world's indifference and unwillingness to accept the overwhelming testimony of the few remaining survivors, and perhaps what is most disturbing today is that this artwork appears in a climate where the open emergence of right wing nationalist and fascist movements has resurfaced actively, committed to the legacy of erasure, of revising and rewriting history and reclaiming publicly the intense fascination with fascist ideology and practice.

Although I've chosen to concentrate on these issues, a number of works have emerged which address a wide variety of histories, legacies of oppression and needs to re-imagine the past so as to set the course for the future. One thinks of Toni Morrison's narratives reclaiming black experience, Canadian-Japanese historical memory narrated in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* and its sequel, or the mournful dances of the Sankai Juku dance troupe; Hou Hsiao-hsien's reworking of Taiwanese history in a number of extraordinary films (most recently *The Puppetmaster*), Terence Davies' autobiographical dream-like narratives of family life in working class Liverpool as well as many others. A number of these rely on subjective memory and are notably elegaic; the artist and the spectators' engagement through these narratives are a form of active 'trauerarbeit' - mourning work. They give voice and form to a painful loss, and challenge who has the right to control and authorize historical veracity, who institutes public discourses regarding history and is responsible for the official inscription of memory. I emphasize that the energy of these works lies in their commitment to a vital impulse of continuity beyond despair. In this sense I hope to distinguish the following examples from being subsumed within the postmodern tradition. These are distinctly different because they depend upon acknowledging a past that is knowable, events which did take place, and they express a purpose, a sense of social justice and/or belief in social change, pointing towards the future.<sup>1</sup> This is not elegaic nostalgia, frozen from exhaustion and cynicism, designed to flatter the audience, but active commemoration - the *act* of remembering is an act of resistance, dissent and challenge.

### Where were you from 1939-1945?

#### Where are you now?

#### *Das Schreckliche Mädchen*

#### One must rethink oneself historically

#### *Tout Va Bien*

This art does not encompass a new aesthetic category, in fact, the best and most accomplished examples utilize the creative edge of narrative realism which shares its border with modernism. Strategies of identification, the use of layered narration, irony, and generic conventions (melodrama, in particular) are used creatively to give shape to subjective experience, to describe physical realities over time, and to critically investigate a period of social history. What did it feel like to be hunted, stripped of every human right and incarcerated? What does it feel like to be swallowed live within an intensely bureaucratic system of suppression, exploitation and murder? Why are crimes perpetrated forty to fifty years ago no longer offensive, no longer thought of as criminal? The intensity of the narrative material is balanced by an analytical style which demands distance; this inside/outside spectator relationship to the constructed representation is implicit in many realist works and characteristic of modernism.<sup>2</sup> The work can both comment critically on the choices and process of representation while freely exploring the fictional modes chosen to express and enhance subjective and experiential detail.

By addressing the legacy of these events, these artists are faced with the modernist dilemma: how to represent realities, events and sensibilities which resist comprehension, which are genuinely shocking and 'shameful',<sup>3</sup> which demand a new language, new images to give shape to trauma and crisis, intense mourning, dislocation and reconstruction. How does one preserve memory endangered by the politics of erasure and willed forgetfulness? How does one assimilate extreme loss? Why is history still vital? It is important to point out that modernism, like realism, doesn't question the existence of a material social world or the ability to experience and distinguish 'real' experience - it is a form of aesthetics used to represent the new realities of modern life and it invites an active, informed response that will (in the best forms of political modernism), lead to a course of action or resistance. That action may just be the act of remembering, of incorporating historical perspective into day to day life, of the refusal to hive off public political engagement from private, familial, personal interests.

Part of the resistance which these artworks encounter is rooted in a cultural unease with allowing fictional modes of representation to address history. This is, in part, grounded in an issue of control in terms of who has the authority to establish public discourses regarding historical memory. In part it is related to a worry of misrepresentation or the fear that sensational spectacle and entertainment will degrade the events remembered and recounted. Aesthetic theorists ranging from Adorno to a variety of postmodernists have objected to the use of popular narrative art which must answer to (and therefore be compromised by) the demands of the marketplace. This unease has surfaced sporadically in the aftermath of the success of Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, which, unfortunately, stands as a good example of the potential abuse of realist fiction in a manner which validates and gives substance to the anxieties of both historians and those who dominate aesthetic theoretical practice.

I hope to demonstrate the very great potential inherent in popular narrative art, to challenge and open up a space for different ways of thinking about and engaging critically with notions of history, the development of historical consciousness and both personal and collective memory; even art produced for the purpose of 'pleasure' within the confines of a medium geared to entertain can highlight contradictions and develop new ways of approaching public and private memory. Its great potential lies in its ability to utilize sophisticated strategies of identification to express authentic feelings of oppression and entrapment, to explore areas which slip through the grid of documented historical discourse. To a large extent this depends on the artist's *use* of existing forms, of her/his ideological position and expression of style. Unfortunately Spielberg is not a great thinker and however talented at staging spectacles, is not renowned for his complex renderings of social situations or the characters inhabiting his narratives. What is most problematic and difficult to overcome in the transition from entertainment to 'art', is that his work is marked by a 'boyish' (read simplistic) patriarchal viewpoint of the social world behind his lens. The problems evident in *Schindler's List* do not, therefore, come as a total surprise. My greatest point of criticism is with the film's structure and practice of mystification. Spielberg empties the narrative of complexity and detail vis à vis its central hero, Oskar Schindler/Liam Neeson. Schindler is constructed via cinematic conventions, not history. He is the swashbuckling outlaw, the charming, pow-

erful good member of the Nazi party (a membership never renounced in the film) whose growing sense of conscience and engagement is less linked to the Jews he saves than it is to a response to his nemesis, the unredeemable Amon Goeth/Ralph Fiennes. As in many cinematic narratives, the two men are structurally paralleled - in their love-making, their manipulation of power manifested through their industrial/managerial positions (head of the factory, head of the camp) their treatment of key supporting characters, like the attractive Helen Hirsch. Schindler's acts of kindness are highlighted as contrast to Goeth's acts of cruelty. In order to maintain this structure (based on the individual as hero), obtrusive details of Schindler's story are given little or no emphasis: his communications with Jewish/Zionist underground groups, his efforts at publicizing the Nazi atrocities, his relations with other Jews like Itzhak Stern. Ben Kingsley's portrayal of Stern (in a touchingly understated performance which went unnoticed and unappreciated) deserves magnification and development as does Schindler's relationship with his other 'Juden', however this would complicate the streamlined mythification of Schindler in opposition to Goeth. (The casting of two extremely attractive, vaguely similar-looking actors underlines the point.) The corollary to this binarism is the disappearance of the individuation of

<sup>1</sup> The historian Saul Friedlander makes this point in his introduction to a collection of essays he edited, entitled *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution."* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> "...postmodern thought's rejection of the possibility of identifying some stable reality or truth beyond the constant polysemy and self-referentiality of linguistic constructs challenges the need to establish the realities and truths of the Holocaust", pp. 4-5.

<sup>3</sup> For a particularly brilliant analysis of this analysis of realism, see Andrew Britton's "Metaphor and Mimesis... *Madame de'*... *Movie*, No. 29/30, Summer 1983, pp. 91-107.

<sup>4</sup> I am using the term shame in the manner explained by Primo Levi (originally in his book *The Reawakening*) quoted and elaborated upon in *The Drowned and The Saved*. New York: Vintage International, 1989.

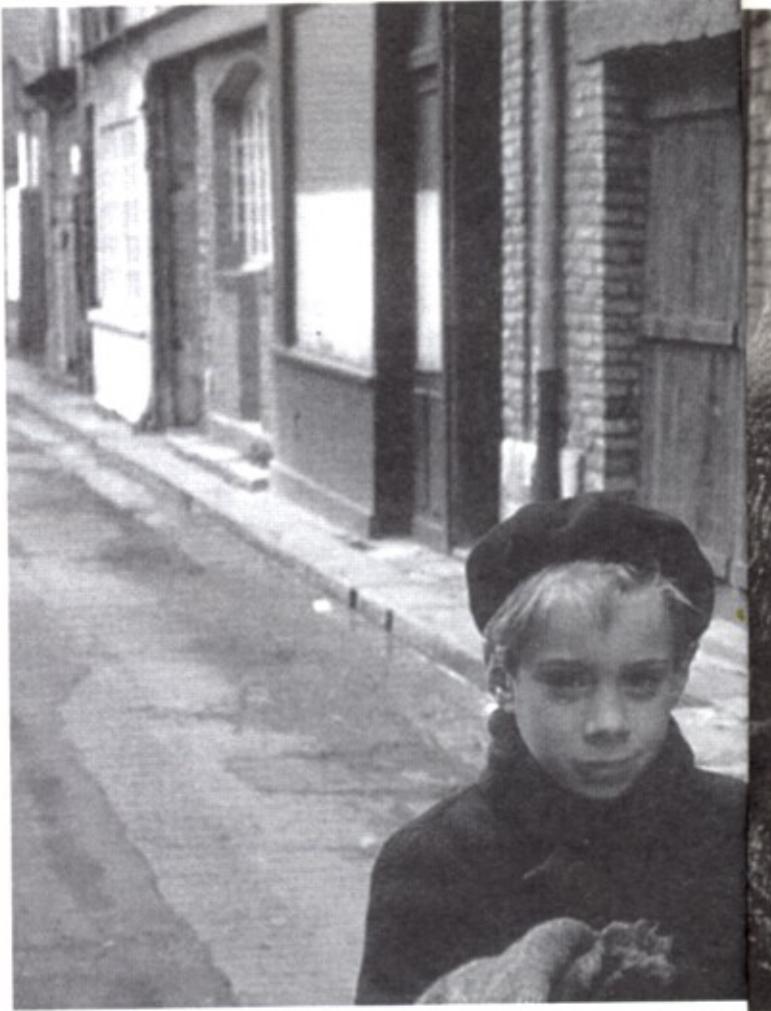
Levi recalls the moment when the Russians arrive to liberate those remaining in the camp and tries to explain the feelings of mutual shame and oppression:

It was the same shame which we knew so well, which submerged us after the selections, and every time we had to witness or undergo an outrage: the shame that the Germans never knew, the shame which the just man experiences when confronted by a crime committed by another, and he feels remorse because of its existence, because of its having been irrevocably introduced into the world of existing things, and because his will has proven nonexistent or feeble and was incapable of putting up a good defense, pp. 72-73.

other characters. Spielberg's lack of development of the Jews, outside of his reliance on stereotypes (evident in scenes like the one wherein Jews barter in the church or in their 'foreign' accents etc.),<sup>4</sup> is the most regrettable, as is the problematic treatment of the aforementioned Helen Hirsch. Spielberg could have made the point of Goeth's brutal terrorisation of her and sexual exploitation without the extended emphasis on her quivering, naked, damp body clinging against her night gown. The takes in this scene are dubious and seem to pander to titillating/exploitive codes of entertainment and the worst offenses of gendered cinematic pleasure.<sup>5</sup>

Ultimately, identification rests firmly with Schindler against Goeth and his world. The spectator follows the narrative through Schindler's perspective. (We are educated along with him.)<sup>6</sup> He is not set in relief - a strategy which would allow for a more analytical response to his trajectory of discovery and his awakened moral consciousness. The audience never gains any firm insight into Schindler's identity. The film, in fact, never really challenges on any level. Its emphasis is not on telling the victim's story, i.e. how were those persecuted saved by Schindler, nor is it centred on the imperative for every citizen to *act*. It sinks to the most conservative misuse of narrativity and the need for closure - it offers a potential happy ending to an unredeeming period of human history.

All this serves to undermine the film's strengths: the detail drained from the presentation of the privileged hero manifests itself in mise-en-scène, and herein lies the film's emotional power and significance as a cultural work. The film's emphasis on the process of reducing human beings to registered names on a list, to numbers and hence, to the status of objects, reminds one of the process of methodical annihilation practiced by the Nazis. Scenes where the Nazi officers carefully unfold their tables and set up their stools chillingly reminds one of the reason why the unfathomable end result - the massacre of millions of people - was never immediately evident. The film doesn't begin with the slaughter during the ghetto liquidation. It begins with the details of typing, numbering and counting, and Schindler's courage was translated through his resistance to this entire process, emblematised in his own list. Around and behind the drama unfolding through Schindler's obscured vision (what *does* he see/feel/think?) are moments where one is forced to imagine what it felt like to be separated from a beloved family member, to arrive at Auschwitz and



see the realization of the most feared 'rumours', or what a selection looked like. These experiential moments are left unspoken, and unimagined in collective forums, deemed inappropriate to the world of mainstream culture, and Spielberg's able renderings of some of this makes the project precious to many who wish to keep this memory alive, despite the compromises of entertainment.

It is not the form of narrative which condemns this film to criticisms of mystification and, at times, overt simplification; it is the artist's engagement with the conventions at hand. *Schindler's List* could have used the positive potentials of cinematic narrative art more consistently and creatively - to accurately describe authentic experiences of fear, oppression, terror, and loss on the part of those innocently hunted, as well as a growing commitment towards action and resistance on the part of those who stood



by - to an enormous audience willing to engage intelligently with events removed through time and memory, but still highly resonant.

***Une affaire de femmes*  
(Story of Women) and  
*Das Schreckliche Mädchen*  
(The Nasty Girl):  
Biography, History and the  
Woman's Film**

There are narratives which use similar conventions in different ways with vastly different results. I'd like to outline two recent films which are loosely comparable only in the manner in which they set out to comment on historical events of the same period through the biographical narrative, raising questions about memory, accountability, empower-

ment and the interdependence of private, familial, gendered identity and experience with that of public, social and national politics. Biography seems an obvious entry point to history through the fictional narrative, as narratives traditionally focus in on individual stories and specific detail, set against broader social contexts. Both films invite identification with the central protagonists but direct identification towards the woman's *positions* of struggle within a social world; neither woman is idealised by being pitted against a mystified source of evil, nor are these films built around those socially empowered, like the industrialist anti-hero. Instead they focus on those whose stories and voices are suppressed, erased, or threatening to the status quo, to the codified and neutralized version of official memory. These stories are not as easily assimilable or recuperable as 'just' entertainment. Significantly the issues presented in each film are magnified by gender - they are structured around women whose actions are deemed criminal by the masculinist society which judges transgressive women more ruthlessly and aggressively than men; Consequently the desire to inscribe their stories within collective memory is more fundamentally challenging.

**A note on melodrama**

Both *Une affaire de femmes* and *Das Schreckliche Mädchen* draw from the traditions of melodrama, from the broader mode encompassing literature and theatre as well as the evolution of the cinematic genre, which was most often centred upon women and domestic issues. The terms of melodrama lend themselves to the concerns of these narratives in a particularly appropriate manner: they offer a set of conventions wherein personal, private experience is placed in relief against a wider social frame (the oppression, injustice, unevenly divided power-based relationships portrayed inevitably point to the dominant ideology and the set of values practised in society).

Melodrama draws meaning from within: from repressed secrets and that which remains unarticulated and unvoiced. Experiences and feelings which

<sup>4</sup> One critic compares these caricatures to those disseminated in *Der Stuermer*. See Philip Gurevich, "A Dissent on Schindler's List", *Commentary* February '94, pp. 49-52 at p. 51.

<sup>5</sup> The drained character types include Schindler's long-suffering wife Emilie, who waits patiently in the wings for the outlaw hero to be completely redeemed as a good husband.

<sup>6</sup> The use of the little girl in the red coat against the sea of grey is an example of Spielberg's 'light' (i.e. unsubtle) touch, in aligning the spectator's identification with Schindler's.

are blocked from 'legitimate' social articulation find expression of meaning through an intentioned use of style, mise-en-scène, loaded gestures, intense detail, narrative counterpoint. Melodrama can accommodate elegiac art because of the emotional intensity embedded in the material (the woman's 'weepy' invited tears) and because of the way its narratives are often marked by loss, separation and crisis, sometimes highlighting a child's point of view and position of complete social powerlessness. Finally, melodrama often is grounded in a trajectory whereby the protagonist explores aspects of her/his identity - Who am I and what do I want - and places these questions within a social world which impedes or punishes difference in a number of ways. Depending on its use and the position the artist takes, melodrama can voice its protest to oppression through the elucidation of concerns largely restricted (and censored) from public forums of expression, voicing and acting out the contradictions of identity and the desire for release and change.

### ***Une affaire de femmes***

I am foregrounding Chabrol's film, co-scripted by Chabrol and Colo Tavernier O'Hagan and starring Isabelle Huppert, because it is an example of a fictionalised historical melodrama<sup>7</sup> which raises issues still relevant to contemporary audiences. The narrative is based on a son's pained/mournful memories of his mother, Marie Latour, one of the last women to be guillotined in France for her crimes against the state; she was killed ostensibly for her status as a practising abortionist. The use of the family as a structural frame suggests that the events are also shaped by the deep emotional resonances which mark familial relationships - they are inseparable in the woman's film. Mme. Latour's 'crime' is situated within a complex of social factors; the oppression of women is set against collaborationist France, an historical moment wherein patriarchal ideology and its demands of women's self-abnegation and servitude were intensified, heightened and put on display.

Unlike many historical dramas (including *Schindler's List*), set safely in a distant era, *Une affaire de femmes'* insistence on outlining a continuity between past and present elicited an extreme, even violent reception in contemporary France and abroad: a theatre exhibiting the film was tear-gas bombed in Paris, many distributors refused to pick up the film, including edge of mainstream distributors like Orion Classics and New Line. One theatre

owner cut Mme. Latour's final sacrilegious curse (evidencing her rejection of patriarchal religion), where she rips off the communion cross given her as she utters "Hail Mary, full of shit, rotten is the fruit of thy womb"<sup>8</sup>). The right-wing masculinist regime is still in place as is society's intense commitment to many of its principles, embodied in "work, family, fatherland". Fascism won its support through its publicized policies, stated with unambiguous clarity: it demanded a clear inequitable division of labour and delineation of gender roles, and equally clear policies dedicated to the eradication of subversive difference across a broad spectrum: 'decadent' art, ideas and finally human degenerate decadence perceived in racial, sexual and social terms. Fascism, and its variants then and now, flourishes in a culture wherein the structure of domination/submission and intolerance is already embedded.

Mme. Latour is not idealised through memory or nostalgia; although the son's voice, at the end of the film, remembering his mother, lends the film an overwhelming sense of melancholy and loss ("it feels like there's a big black hole inside"). *Une affaire de femmes* carefully sets up a distanced, qualified position of identification with its heroine. In many ways her 'typicalness' is most emphasized; she is an unsophisticated petite bourgeoisie who aspires to upward mobility, a career as a singer and greater comfort for herself and her family. She neither has an awareness of politics nor of an articulated social commitment, and when finally arrested is unaware of the ramifications of her actions and is shocked by the response it engenders. By focussing on Mme. Latour's typicalness (*not* difference) the film undermines her status as exotic criminal and connects her story (and her crime) to every woman. Like Mme. Bovary her crime is her refusal to accept the place assigned to her within society, and within her husband's home. She refuses to relinquish all rights to her freedom (including her right to economic betterment, sexual expression or the pleasure she receives from singing). This rebelliousness threatens the status quo in a fundamental way, and it is this crisis which acts as the catalyst for many of the narratives of the woman's film. Masculine dominance in the private and national domain depends upon the woman's willingness to accept her subordination. Her refusal to do so implies a negation of the laws of gender difference - she is usurping the masculine position of privilege and power to work, to have access to money, to be sexually active, to refuse to remain sequestered within the family and home and be defined as her hus-

band's property. Throughout the film Marie Latour outlines her wishes and privileges her needs: she fulfills her role as mother and genuinely cares for her children but she also expresses her pleasure derived from her relationships with other women, her music, her money, her sexual liaisons, and pursues these with increasing intensity and recklessness. Because Mme. Latour's crimes are described as crimes against the state - i.e. as crimes which threaten the structural *basis* of society - her story lends itself to a commentary upon women's oppression generally. It demonstrates the manner in which 'morality' is used ultimately, as a cover for the implementation and securing of masculine dominance.

The conditions of Vichy France magnify the norm, underlining unambiguously the interdependence of the realms of public and private in terms of gender and class. In one scene, Paul Latour/François Cluzet listens to Maréchal Pétain on the radio claiming, "For two years I have thought of only one thing, clearing the paths that lead to peace: A strengthened and honoured family, the creation of youth organizations ..." The response to the film in contemporary France points to the continued relevance of this history to contemporary social issues, particularly in the 80's and 90's when debates regarding women's rights and access to state supported abortion and childcare still rage. Mme. Latour views her business as an abortionist as an astute business enterprise because she is providing a much needed service or 'favour', an activity which is part of the woman's domain. Like many melodramatic heroines, she is blind to the broader social implications, a context which the narrative provides. Abortion is more threatening to society fundamentally than prostitution for example (both crimes offend moral standards) because it is a service *for* women (female prostitution also services male pleasure and empowerment). Abortion allows women the freedom to control and determine the terms and conditions of motherhood, reproduction and sexual expression, thus providing women with a recourse which can undo what binds them to their prescribed roles. Mme. Latour's clients clearly articulate why they seek her services: her neighbor, Ginette, wishes to avoid a pregnancy while her lover is called to the war effort, women are enjoying sexual encounters while their husbands/lovers are away from home, a woman wishes to be sexually active (with her husband) without accepting responsibility for yet another unwanted child (the dilemma is exacerbated in a Catholic country where birth control is prohibited

to anyone, within or without marriage). The need for abortion is undeniable proof of women venturing beyond their place (and as is noted in the film, the abortion rate exceeded the birth rate). The women are eloquent in describing their common oppression and the pressures, frustration and rage they feel. The film thus supports an awareness of women - identified experience which extends beyond the individual characters.

The breadth of the articulation and demystification of the myths of what society thinks women want and need, is remarkable. The film begins by debunking a variety of myths (surrounding matriarchal plenitude and perfection) used to co-opt women in acquiescing willingly to their own oppression. The film immediately establishes Marie Latour's affinity with her daughter and preference for women generally. She does not love her children equally and impartially and is rather nonchalant about expressing this in front of "le canard", her chosen endearment for her son, Pierre. Within his earshot she tells her neighbor "I got it right this time", referring to her little girl whom she is carrying up the stairs. When Pierre confronts her as to whether she was happy when he was born, she replies evasively, "It's always right to have a boy". It is the first expression of the conflict between what she desires and what is deemed 'right'. The film outlines the mother's unwillingness to sublimate her needs for her family; she leaves her two young children alone for a night out with her friend Rachel, explaining she has a right to her pleasure ("After all, I'm still young") beyond the social dictates of maternal sacrifice. The heart of this pleasure is her friend Rachel, who is arrested because she is a Jew, early on in the narrative, and disappears suddenly from Marie's life. Her absence haunts the rest of the film. Despite the brevity of the scene in the pub wherein the two women drink and dance beyond curfew, and Marie tells Rachel "Tu as de beaux yeux tu sais" (translated as "You've got angel eyes") and confides of her innermost desire to sing onstage, it becomes pivotal to the remainder of the narrative. The comment places Marie Latour within the active role of lover speaking to the object of romantic desire.

<sup>7</sup> The film is adapted from the novel of the same name by Francis Szwepner which is an account of the life and death of Marie-Louise Giraud.

<sup>8</sup> Oddly, the film has not received the critical attention it deserves (from feminist film scholars, if no one else). This is probably symptomatic of the critical indifference to Chabrol's work generally, and of the snubbing of mainstream realist art.

Throughout the film Mme. Latour is never presented as being particularly emotional or overly sentimental, yet the scene where she learns of Rachel's departure is marked by a privileged moment. She is shot in close up, sitting on the steps, crying. It is one of three moments (the latter moments taking place when she is incarcerated and increasingly realizes the extreme gravity of her situation) in which a display of genuine, deeply-felt loss is registered. Following sections of the narrative establish her loveless marriage and the fact that her children have displaced their father in the matrimonial bed (at one point Fernande, the new housekeeper, asks M. Latour, "Does your wife always sleep with the little girl?"), while Rachel has displaced the husband in an emotional sense. The loss of Rachel is also linked to Marie Latour's transgression in the illicit undertaking of her business. Although its profit value is what consciously motivates her to provide the service, it is clearly a nascent expression of her protest. Besides benefitting women (herself included) Marie is proudly and defiantly aware that it causes risks and is against the law - a law which she increasingly rejects. Soon after her husband's unannounced and unwelcomed return as a wounded soldier, Marie befriends a prostitute, Lucie called Lulu/Marie Trintignant, who visually resembles Rachel (and proceeds to call Marie "my little angel" throughout their friendship). Lulu befriends Marie admitting that she is a prostitute and comments that "men always treat us like horses", and Marie's response, her admission and token of friendship in return is that she had a friend who was taken away because she was said to be Jewish. Marie then proceeds to announce that she and Lulu have a lot in common because she is not a "simple housewife", in fact she says, "I do things against the law". Intrigued Lulu asks, "like what, angel?" and Marie responds, "that's just it..." The narrative aligns Marie's confession about profiting from breaking the law as an abortionist (the French slang for 'backstreet' abortion is "faiseuse d'anges", "the maker of angels"), to the loss of Rachel ("angel eyes").

I have elaborated upon these selected scenes because the narrative establishes a double strain, articulating to the audience a complex of facets of the 'crime' that will eventually lead to Marie's imprisonment and execution. The narrative describes and connects Marie's growing rejection of her place to her suppressed desire for women and her usurping a male position as breadwinner. At one point when Marie is particularly pleased with

herself, her new home, her success as a business woman etc., she sits in her kitchen and daydreams of dancing with Rachel. The inserted dream/flashback ties these points together. At the same time the film refuses to idealize the protagonist as a cognizant victim.<sup>9</sup> She is not a talented singer although the film supports her naive energy, and the plaintive song performed for her music instructor, sung as a background to the reading of her husband's accusatory collage indictment, is haunting and deeply moving, springing from a source of unhappiness for which Marie Latour herself cannot fully account. She is often brutal and unsympathetic to her husband's humiliation, pain and sense of loss. She is motivated to a large extent by greed, accepting payment for a client who has died, possibly through her negligence. She chooses to confirm her newly-acquired intoxicating sense of power and upward mobility by choosing a lover who in many ways epitomizes the dominant culture's ideal of masculinity (he is aggressive, direct and swaggering) and fascism. (He exploits his links to the German occupying forces and enjoys the privileges the collaboration offers; like Marie he describes his work as rendering 'services'). She meets him as a spectator witnessing a contest sponsored by the Nazis wherein a bemasked male (adorned in a caricatured headpiece of a woman) must behead a goose with a clean sweep of a blade. The contest is a test of masculine prowess and cruelty, but also aligns Lucien/Nils Tavernier with the role of executioner (a profession linked to Marie's son, who announces his desire at a celebration where he has been, yet again, bypassed by his mother - he explains his wish to be an executioner because they get to wear a mask and no one knows who they are). Marie admires Lucien's overt masculinity, and comments on his "forceful" handling of his sword (contrasted to her emasculated husband). At the same time the lover is visually feminized (through the casting of Nils Tavernier's 'feminine' delicate beauty) and through his name, Lucien, linked to Lucie/Lulu, thus complicating Marie Latour's reasons for the attraction.

The act of performing the abortion is visualized as a masculine act of empowerment, wherein a phallic-like tube is inserted into the vagina. The act is often shot as a metaphor of lovemaking, where the woman lies prone feet spread etc. (her neighbor Ginette verbalizes the connection when she is lying on the kitchen floor and comments that people often make love on the ground). The shot often isolates the keyhole view of the spread legs and inserted

tube, as when Marie's son curiously peers through the keyhole. Mme. Latour usurps the masculine position visually and metaphorically, and refuses to relinquish her new-found sense of power. As a result, her defiance becomes more and more openly proclaimed and less disguised, and the implications of her actions become less and less manageable.

Marie Latour slowly associates her motivations with a broader network of oppression. Although her wish to move to a larger location is partly prompted by Lulu's refusal to rent her child's bedroom for her sexual encounters (Lulu has principles which are beyond Marie), she prefaces the announcement to move by declaring to her husband, "I've been a slave since I was fourteen and I can't see how it can change". Paul's response to this, "like most women", is met by her anger, "I don't care about 'most' women, I can't take it any longer". The Latours move up into a larger apartment and Marie can now exploit the extra space to expand her business and rent out bedrooms to Lulu and other prostitutes; she also trains her new housekeeper (whom she enlists as a paid sexual companion for her husband) as an apprentice abortionist. Although she runs her business with an eye for maximized profits, Mme. Latour identifies with and understands her clients' desires, sharing their refusal and resistance to self-abnegation and familial servitude. One of the most powerful feminist scenes in the film, which foregrounds Chabrol's (and Tavernier O'Hagan's) complex use of narrativity takes place when a woman, Jasmine, comes to see Mme. Latour for an abortion, and describes her unwillingness to have another child. By this point one is aware that to Mme. Latour the venture is strictly business and the monologue is unnecessary in the terms set up by Mme. Latour - she never asks for an explanation. Yet the scene privileges Jasmine with a long take, as she tells her deeply moving personal history detailing her refusal to have another child. She declares that she doesn't love her children and never did. The two women are linked - not by Mme. Latour's concern or politics - but by their mutual rejection of an allotted space and by their smoldering rage. Neither woman values her identity in the terms set out by society. When Jasmine lies in her marital bed with her husband, burning with fever (and metaphorically, with anger) she rejects her husband's pleas to call for a doctor and chooses to die. The film never clarifies whether her death is attributable to Mme. Latour's (and her housekeeper's) negligence or to her attempts to kill her fetus by any means possible; it

establishes her willing death as an escape from her impoverished unhappy life.

Mme. Latour's final transgression which instigates the trajectory towards her death sentence is the moment where she relinquishes the pretense of bourgeois respectability and invites Lulu and Lucien back to her home and is discovered by her husband asleep with her lover in the conjugal bed. (It is unclear what the 'party' consisted of, or to what extent it was witnessed by her children, but she knew her husband would return eventually and she no longer seems to care.) Significantly this final protest is again linked to her unwillingness to accept the permanent loss of Rachel, now certainly murdered for her racial status as a Jew without protest from her national country of origin. In the scene preceding her husband's discovery, Marie stops at the pub to ask for news of Rachel and is confronted with the comment "Do you ever hear of Jews coming back?" The scene directly follows with Paul's return home, connecting her permanent loss of Rachel with her flagrant rebellion which seals her fate.

Marie Latour's actions are never presented as acts of intentioned radical protest. She is not offended by German policies (until it touches her close companion). In fact, like many of her nation's citizens she lives with the occupation easily and is attracted to the strength and power embodied in fascist showmanship, so much so that she wishes to partake of it. When she feebly tells her husband, "I'm for the resistance", he sharply informs her "You're for nothing". Her very ordinariness places the dénouement in sharp perspective, emphasizing that the battle is about fundamental rights, particularly women's rights.

The battle lines are clearly drawn in terms of gender and class. Marie Latour and her fellow inmates understand that men, particularly those privileged and empowered by their class, will never understand or attempt to offer equitable justice. Marie states this delineating the hypocrisy:

"It's true. They spend the war sitting on their ass, then pick a woman out of the blue...not

<sup>9</sup> Isabelle Huppert's comment in a recent interview sums this up. "Sur *Une affaire de femmes*, en revanche, nous étions bien d'accord qu'il s'agissait d'un personnage à la fois parfaitement pathétique, parfaitement dégueulasse, et parfaitement émouvant." (With *Une affaire de femmes*, we all agreed, it concerned a character who was at once perfectly pathetic, disgusting and moving.) Isabelle Huppert from "Conversation avec Claude Chabrol et Emmanuelle Bernheim", *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 477, Mars 1994.

one born with a silver spoon in her mouth. They throw her in prison just to make an example but who will take care of Pierre and Mouche? They don't care...they have maids. It's easy to have clean hands if you're rich...And it's all men. How could men understand, anyway?"

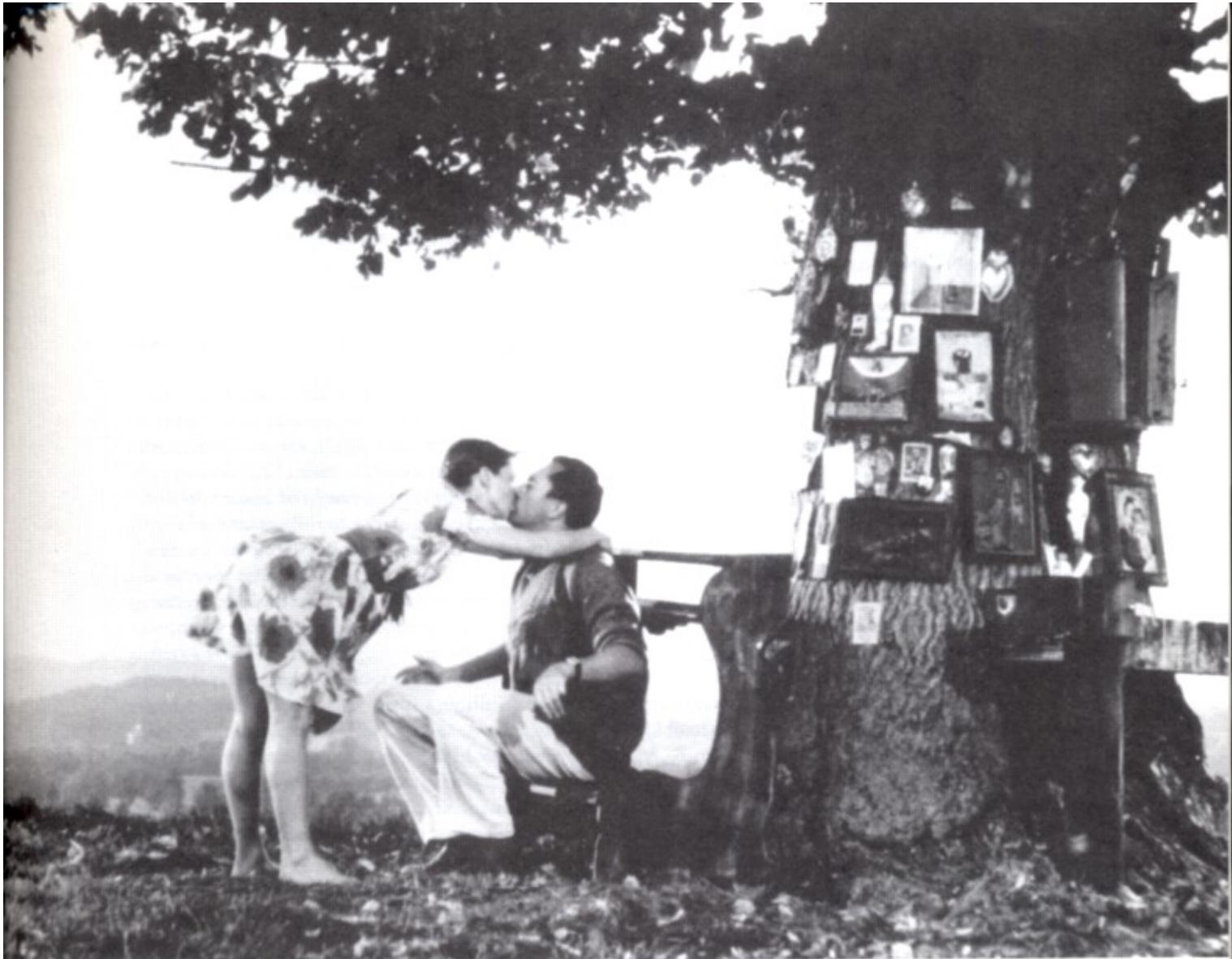
Although Mme. Latour's lawyer genuinely attempts an appeal for clemency, and accurately identifies his country's and every male citizen's cowardly participation in the crimes enacted by Nazi Germany, he evidences his guilty compliance with the system he has described and condemned, and demonstrates his continued cowardice by sending a junior articling attorney to inform Mme. Latour of her impending death. Marie Latour reaches a startling awareness of the underpinnings of her oppression, by the end of the film. She not only realizes that the law protects men and rich men in particular, but rejects its collaboration with organized religion in maintaining women's oppression through the myth of maternal adoration. In one of the most startling moments of the popular cinema, she rips off the crucifix/communion medal given to her and pronounces her revelation, "Hail Mary, full of shit, rotten is the fruit of thy womb". Whether this was ever uttered historically makes little difference - it communicates Marie Latour's awakening and calls forth the deeply buried subjective responses which shape authentic events. Despite the narrative's complex rendering of its central protagonist, it supports her identity as a committed loving mother who genuinely believed she was caring for her children by bettering their lives while refusing to sacrifice her own. This is confirmed by the son's voice who proclaims his love for his mother and admires her spirited energy despite his awareness of her preferences and shortcomings.

The necessity of justifying the control of women through state legislation and eradicating protest absolutely as one would "a gangrenous limb" aligns the historical events of Vichy France with the present without ambiguity. What is exposed and brought to light is the fear that women's rights to self-determination will challenge the continuity of a society that depends upon their subordination. Paul Latour, the benign impotent husband, indicts his wife for usurping his role and denying him his identity as an active husband who reigns in his home and outside it. The film thus aligns the private realm of Father, Mother and family to its national counterpart: France was humiliated by Germany and denied its power and authoritative control. Madame

Latour's execution was a symbolic expression of a need to counteract a nationally wounded ego. There is little doubt that the narrative's elucidation of the interdependence of these historical issues and their contemporary applicability challenges the official inscription of these events in the nation's consciousness, insisting on a revaluation that many would prefer to deny. Chabrol has continued to make this point in his recent documentary, *L'Oeil de Vichy* (1993), much like other national 'thorns', for example, Marcel Ophuls and Claude Lanzmann, who have established themselves through their work as voices of dissent demystifying and challenging national truths regarding French resistance and overall moral behaviour during the Occupation and after. These works not only insist on rethinking a nation's image of itself - then and now - but of the role of art and culture, crossing the spectrum of documentary/biography/fiction in the process of revaluation and remembrance.

### **Notes on *Das Schreckliche Mädchen***

*Das Schreckliche Mädchen* documents the biographical experience of Anja Rosmus, fictionalised and renamed Sonja Wegmus Rosenberger/Lena Stolze, a young citizen of Passau (renamed Pfilzing), whose project of researching her hometown's activities during the Third Reich leads her to passionately commit herself to rethinking official history (a history virtually erased from the contemporary consciousness in Germany), to unearthing and vocalizing her hometown's overall state of complicity during those years. The film outlines Sonja's journey whereby she matures into an aware, committed young woman who decides to act and to respond to the legacy of Nazism, challenging the strong movement of denial, apathy and forgetfulness present in her hometown and her country. Germany's well chronicled "inability to mourn"<sup>10</sup> and latent (and not so latent) fascist tendencies continue unabated in the present. Sonja is dedicated to awakening a generation eager to forget and too willing to embrace fascism in a contemporary form. Whereas *Une affaire de femmes* is committed to remembering through revaluation, *Das Schreckliche Mädchen*'s battle is in its resistance to complaisant forgetfulness. The antipathy and outrage with which Sonja is greeted demolishes her home, her family, her status within the community as citizen/neighbor and nearly her life. The film points to the continuity of the past in the present evident in Sonja's fight for civil rights,



*Das Schreckliche Mädchen*: Sonja and Martin at the Tree of Mercy.

tolerance and elementary social freedoms like the freedom of speech. The official response to history is evasion, silence or denial. The European community can initiate didactic contests with topics like "The Concept of Europe" or "Freedom in Europe" or even "My Hometown during the Third Reich", but directs its education towards the safe transmission of 'correct', acceptable historical 'truths' (often evoking mythic membership to resistance groups which didn't exist). The second strategy used to control history is that of recuperation - when Sonja gains notoriety and international attention, the town decides to fête her by casting her image in plaster and stone. The attempt to control and fix her voice through containment is rejected by the protagonist

as an act of entombment, "Don't let them stifle me", she implores, "I'm still a living person".

At various points in the film reference is made to the variety of ways a nation revises, codifies and entrenches the version of history it wishes permanently to inscribe. The opening image of the film is of a statue of a female nude bathed in gold light. Against this image, the protagonist, Sonja, reads a passage from the Nibelungenlied from approximately 1200 A.D.:

<sup>10</sup> This thesis has been set forth in a seminal work of this title by Alex and Margarete Mitscherlich. *The Inability to Mourn*, New York: Grove Press, 1975..

We are told in tales of old  
Many wondrous things  
Of heroes and their valour  
Of great deeds and labours  
Of joys and celebrations  
Of tears and lamentations  
And the clash of warriors bold.  
May you hear these wonders told.

The quotation reminds one of the patriarchal inscription of history - mythic tales of heroes, valour, warriors etc. - counterpointed with Sonja's voice and the image of the female nude. The introduction sets the structure and strategy of the film: it illustrates, through counterpoint, the clash between Sonja's search for historical veracity and the official denial and revision of history through the powers that control it, namely, the state, the church, and institutions of education and culture. (The film is also critical of international post-war complicity in denying history through the cold war anti-communist policies which mitigated and supported convenient revision). Another image which closely follows (prefaced by a shot of youths carousing in a pub, echoing their predecessors who supported Hitler and his beerhall Putsch) is of a man erasing graffiti from the face of a building (possibly the cathedral). The graffiti call for a national revaluation and application of history in contemporary life: "Where were you in 1939-1945? Where are you now?" The form in which the questions appear is subversive and outside of the law, and its erasure summarizes the battle Sonja takes on.

At the heart of *Das Schreckliche Mädchen* is the notion of Heimat - one's homeland. The intense nationalist longings at the centre of fascism are still culturally and socially evident. (Witness Edgar Reitz's longstanding drive to untarnish the concept for mainstream television through his mammoth two-part series.) Sonja is committed to making her home town and nation habitable, but her strategy is not one of deflection or denial. One must confront and address the legacy inherited, understand the events in order to reject them, and build toward a free and tolerant future. In this way a generation condemned to live with the crimes of the past can work towards active social change. Unfortunately, Sonja earns the title of 'schreckliche mädchen', a term not adequately translated in the English title of "the nasty girl". Schreckliche is more than nasty, and is closer to 'terrible'. Sonja's unrelenting engagement in her work of investigating national

historical memory is perceived as an unwelcome illness, by young and old alike (and is particularly transgressive coming from a young woman). In fact, Sonja embodies the return of the repressed. She forces memory onto a town and nation which has carefully buried its recent past. The intolerance and persecution her activities engender, point to a continuity with a past badly in need of education and redress.

The film, to its credit, places Sonja's quest for a conscionable identity that includes social responsibility, within a wider struggle; she is a woman who chooses to define herself outside of the distinct categories of student/citizen/daughter/ housewife/mother. Pfizing's intolerance to difference is as deeply rooted as its Tree of Mercy. I respect the film's insistence (brave in Catholic Bavaria, even in the 90's) to root fascism in the Church, in its teachings and inbred intolerance, and to illustrate its support of Hitler's policies during the war. This is a central theme in *Das Schreckliche Mädchen*, drawn out in detail. Pfizing's town square is dominated by its cathedral. Against the fortress of masculine authority embodied in the church (not necessarily in *men*: Sonja's Uncle Franz, the vicar, and Father Schulte, the priest murdered for his teachings of racial tolerance, are voices of dissent, whereas the nuns, for example, prop up the church's patriarchal authority) is the feminine spirituality of the Tree of Mercy, endearingly called 'liebe baum' by Sonja and her classmates; it is isolated from the town and is a place of refuge where Sonja experiences her sexual awakening and finally hides there from a world wherein she feels persecuted and alone. The church joins forces with the government to solidify the practice of oppression and erasure: Sonja learns that priests during the war openly and maliciously continued archaic anti-semitic practices of blood libels, by sending Jews to concentration camps on the basis of false charges. Ironically, the same Professor Juckenack who lectures in the university on the Third Reich's use of 15th century practices of persecution is one of the priests who committed this crime and also came to concentration camps in the town's vicinity to say Mass and help separate political prisoners from being sent on to death camps, as were the Jewish prisoners. The film then implies that the church and its teachings continue to support Neo-Nazism. In one startling vignette Neo-Nazis are seen reciting a prayer to the Almighty: "God bless our weapons, be just and bless our struggle (unsere kampf)". In another scene, following the bombing of Sonja's

home by two bemasked youths, there is a cut to the local pub, where the boisterous youthful crowd (already previously linked to manifestations of violence) are imaged against a rear projection of a crucified Christ. The shot insists on linking the Church and its teachings to contemporary violence. Sonja's growing mature awareness of the Church's involvement during the Third Reich (which originates in her naive intentions to demonstrate the Church's integrity during this period) is drawn against her nascent, youthful remembrance, presented ironically and often humorously, of the Church's less serious moral contradictions, inequities (particularly when linked to issues of gender), and forms of minor corruption, like the instances when the nuns privilege students whose parents have donated generously by providing them with the test questions prior to an exam. Sonja's mother is quietly yet directly requested to stop teaching her religion classes when she is obviously pregnant (ironically with Sonja) because, however legitimate, her sexuality is on display. School children are kept in gender-distinct classrooms with frosted windows for fear of any interaction, visual, sexual or otherwise. The emphasis on the young girls' commitment to their "liebe baum", as an alternative site for prayer and refuge, evidences their preference for an expression of spirituality outside of the confines of patriarchally organized religion. The tree emblematises a life-giving force not contained or inscribed by social hierarchies. Even the question of knowledge - who has the right to educate and institutionalize national historical memory - is clearly defined in the film. Sonja learns about resistance from her grandmother who clearly remembers the concentration camp bordering the town, and is arrested for her activities of moral resistance, or her Uncle Franz, a vicar who can still remain critical of the church and supports her quest for the truth. Towards the end of the film Sonja has a vision of herself isolated as a contemporary Joan of Arc, being burnt at the stake for her transgressions. Even Sonja's well-meaning husband questions her claims to social commitment demanding, "What does social commitment mean when her husband has to bed down the kids?". The battle Sonja takes on is far-reaching and overwhelming - it is against all forms of social organization; the town council, the mayor, local priests, professors, educators unite to protect their right of empowerment by preserving officially-sanctioned history against the invasive, challenging curiosity of one determined young woman.

*Das Schreckliche Mädchen* invites identification with Sonja's struggle, with her insistence on exercising her right to uncover historical narratives which contradict and present alternatives to those concer- tized and mystified by town and national lore. This identification is kept analytical through an engaging style which consistently foregrounds the process of narrativity and the construction of realism through irony, and counterpoint. The film utilizes the style and structure of a quasi-documentary (at points it seems that Sonja is recording her testimony for German television), repetition, still photographed backdrops or obvious rear projection, and black and white photography used for a number of Sonja's memory sequences, to announce itself as a construction (and, at times, to comment on the foreground). It also suggests that all narratives, even historical ones, are constructions and representations. The audience is invited to engage in a lively dialogue, through a style which expresses its allegiance to the modernist legacy of Berthold Brecht as it both informs, entertains and moves beyond Sonja's individual story to serve as a call to awaken and act. (As Sonja's grandmother repeats, "Take an example from Sonja!"). It is, nevertheless, grounded in a traditionally realist format structured, on the one hand, as Sonja's story, but introduced with the prologue that insists that the narrative mixes fact and fiction and is pertinent to all towns in Germany. Although *Das Schreckliche Mädchen* falls within the category of 'European art film', it enjoyed wide distribution (and was nominated for an Academy Award for best foreign film) and, more significantly, played in theatres all over Germany, including Passau. (Anja Rosmus mentions the fact that town officials and citizens who boycotted the film in Passau went to see it in neighboring cities.<sup>11)</sup> It stretches any easy-definition and can be most clearly described in terms of what it isn't - not completely fiction, not documentary, not mainstream realist, not easily dismissed within the rubric of entertainment. The film is left equally open-ended with the image of Sonja taking refuge in her beloved tree with her young daughter, who will presumably inherit her struggle; it uses the specific but its lesson is to insist that one must take a stand and be vigilant and accountable, never sinking behind the excuse of complacency and complicit silence. The film leaves one asking Sonja's questions: Who are you? Who do you support? Where do you draw the line of national borders? What do you call home? Why is history important? *Das Schreckliche Mädchen* demands that one remembers

and outlines the imperative of active engagement through its insistence that the resurgence of the right and the reappearance of its policies of violence and intolerance demands it.

### **Art Spiegelman's *Maus*: A Survivor's Tale Parts I & II**

The two films discussed above are in many ways woman-centred melodramas, creatively reworking the best fictional conventions of the genre and mode in order to represent and make reference to authentic social experiences which are vital to a culture. I am ending with some comments on Art Spiegelman's *Maus*<sup>12</sup> (which will serve as an introduction, to be continued) as a means of contrast to *Schindler's List* (I am disposed to a structure of symmetry and a degree of closure). *Maus* is a modernist work which draws from fictional melodrama and its expressionist roots, as well as the tradition of "low-brow" comics, yet at the same time, it is intensely committed to historical veracity and realist representation, and serves as a useful detour towards rethinking the possibilities of challenging the strict distinctions between serious art and commodified entertainment, modernism and realism, documentary and fiction, public and private history.

Like *Das Schreckliche Mädchen* and *Une affaire de femmes*, history is filtered through personal experience and is placed within a social frame because individual identity grows from the acts of previous generations and in turn affects the future. *Maus* is constructed as an interplay of two narratives: Art Spiegelman's reconstruction of his father Vladek's testimony of his survival (Art acts as his father's historian, recording, transcribing and re-imagining Vladek's memories of life in Poland on the eve of World War II, of hiding during the first years of the war and of his final incarceration in Auschwitz) as well as his own familial story, his relationship with the 'ruins' of his family - the phantom brother whose image haunts as a memory/photograph, his mother who killed herself and "left no note", whose voice is permanently and traumatically lost in the destruction of her diaries, and his father, the scarred survivor.

*Maus I* is aptly subtitled, "My Father Bleeds History". The metaphor encapsulates the gaps of historiographic practices which art fills in through the personal voice and representation of experiential detail along with 'objective' facts. This history 'bleeds' beyond the father, touching the son and generations to follow. Despite Spiegelman's

attempts to disengage from and live outside of 'Auschwitz', the past haunts him and demands that he try to imagine the events as authentically as possible. This form of active remembrance is a means whereby the author can analyze and confront his own anger, resentment and sense of loss, and channel these feelings into a more positive understanding of the effects of this shadow world on his own.

Although *Maus* is not a film or even an animated comic, it is intensely cinematic and draws from the melodrama, both in terms of the mode and the visual iconography of the cinematic genre. Themes of entrapment, victimization and oppression punctuate the narrative. The evocation of repressed pain (the narrative of the mother's suicide, drawn in a darker more expressionist style against a border of black is a the core of *Maus I*) and Art's commitment to re-imagine Auschwitz as a necessary step in his exploration of his own identity are rooted in the concerns of melodrama. In many ways the child's voice behind the adult frames *Maus*. This extends from the choice of metaphor<sup>13</sup> (the cat/mouse oppressor/victim relationship was one established through the child's medium of comics and cartoons, often referring to the oppression of Blacks in America) to the opening memory which introduces and prefaces *Maus I*. Art recalls a childhood memory of his father's perception and response to his friends having abandoned him after a fall: "Friends? Your friends?...If you lock them together in a room with no food for a week...THEN you could see what it is, friends!..." The child is confronted with the world of the camps, a view beyond his imagination. At various moments in *Maus II*<sup>14</sup> Art shrinks to the size of a child when feeling overwhelmed by the task he's taken on (namely to reconstruct and document Auschwitz), and by the international response it elicits. Some of the greatest cinematic melodramas, like Douglas Sirk's *Written on the Wind* (in many senses a male melodrama) are underpinned by the character's inheritance of a legacy of oppression - a world which the protagonist didn't create but was born into and must struggle with.

All of the artworks outlined in this project open up wounds by penetrating through repressed, guarded layers of memory and history. Vladek wraps up the testimony of his narrative, at the end of *Maus II*, with his reunion with Anja, his wife. "More I don't need to tell you. We were both very happy, and lived happy, happy ever after", and he continues telling his son at his bedside, "So...let's stop, please, your tape recorder...I'm tired from talking, Richieu,



*Une affaire de femmes*

and it's *enough* stories for now..." He addresses Art with the name of his dead brother Richieu, and the moment sums up the inability to impose a happy ending, despite Vladek's claims to one. The past seeps through one's consciousness and reemerges in these radically traditional works of art.<sup>15</sup>

#### *Endnotes*

I wish to thank the Ontario Arts Council for their generous financial support provided through the Arts Writing Programs.

11 "Voices From a New Europe: *The Nasty Girl*", Ideas, CBC, October 9, 1992.

12 Art Spiegelman *Maus I A Survivor's Tale, My Father Bleeds History* New York: Pantheon Books, 1986; *Maus II A Survivor's Tale, And Here My Troubles Began*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1991.

13 I am aware of the other purposes this metaphor serves, which will be elaborated further in a more extensive reading of Spiegelman's *Maus* at a later date.

14 For instance in *Maus II*, chapter two, entitled "Auschwitz (time flies)". *Maus II* is also dedicated to Richieu and Nadja (the author's daughter) and includes a black and white photograph of Richieu.

15 Robert Storr refers to *Maus* as a radically traditional work of art in his notes to an exhibition of the artist's drawings at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Dec. 17 - Jan. 28, 1992.

# Driven to Distraction: Going to the Movies with Walter and Siegfried

by Paul Kelley and Susan Lord

For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.  
**Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Concept of History***

Roughly speaking, my interest lies with the nascent state of great ideological movements, that period when they were not yet institutionalized but still competed with other ideas for supremacy.

**Siegfried Kracauer,**  
*History. The Last Things Before the Last*

Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer shared an ethical attitude: the present, dynamic and changing, continually eludes and possibly effaces the very inherited concepts by which one seeks to understand it. In their works they not only give a privileged position to cinema, but use it to grasp their present, from which revered notions have fallen away or been superseded.

But why return (again) to the writings of these theorists (beyond some dry-boned notion of cultural archaeology for its own sake) at a time when the black-and-white flicker of the *Kinopalast* has become the blue aura of the populist orchestrations that is Oprah? Why return to these two modernists when we are moving along the entry ramp to the supposedly democratising information super-highway?

Some attention has recently been given to Kracauer's writings of the 1920s, largely on the spur of the promise

of Thomas Y. Levin's translation of *Das Ornament der Masse: Essays* (slated for publication in 1988, but as yet unavailable). The only two essays that have been translated into English from this volume indicate that film, for Kracauer, made possible radical thinking in the form of the questions he considered and the speculations concerning the relationship of culture and freedom they provoked. Benjamin, too, saw film as that which placed in question all accepted notions of art and culture. And while he perceived in its destructive potential—that is, its elimination of the traditional modes of perception and self-understanding—a tremendous possibility for emancipation, he remained, perhaps most wisely, silent concerning its actualization. The questions Benjamin and Kracauer confronted, nascent in their time, have not gone away, nor have they been answered. They have, rather, aged.

# I

T.W. Adorno wrote of his friend Walter Benjamin: "In all his phases, [he] conceived the downfall of the subject and the salvation of humanity as inseparable."<sup>1</sup> Adorno's philosophy, as is well-known, never permitted him to endorse those particular extremes to which Benjamin's "anti-subjectivism" led him. Of Benjamin's and Adorno's philosophical and aesthetic divergences, perhaps the best-known concerns their respective attitudes toward film. For Benjamin, the development of film involves precisely that binding together of the "downfall of the subject and the salvation of humanity" Adorno rejects but correctly observes as a concern central to all of Benjamin's work. By foregrounding this concern with the demise of the subject, it is possible to read in the extremely complex and rich meditations that comprise the "Work of Art" essay ("The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical [or 'Technological'] Reproducibility")<sup>2</sup> some of its more radical implications. Regrettably, space does not permit a detailed analysis of this essay's major concerns. Nevertheless, they can be sketched as follows.

Briefly: Benjamin's central thesis in the "Work of Art" essay holds that the rise of the media of technological reproducibility, most notably photography and film, have drastically transformed the very notion of all hitherto accepted notions of Art, perhaps to the degree that Art itself no longer has any meaning. But equally, and complementarily, these media correspond to a similar historical transformation which human beings themselves have undergone. The means and the relations of production—and of reproduction—under industrial capitalism have made of the self-identical individual subject (whether in Cartesian or Kantian garb) an empty husk, a mere residuum. Woven throughout Benjamin's discussion of the "withering of aura" (221) in the artwork, a dissolution effected by mechanical reproduction, is the corresponding dissolution of the individual subject as the basis of knowledge. In fact, the destruction of the former entails, *necessarily*, the destruction of the latter. Benjamin approves wholeheartedly (in the "Work of Art" essay, at least) of this radical destruction, for it is inseparable from, and it is the precondition of, emancipation.

Benjamin's several definitions of "aura" can be quite entangling, for each amends the other by providing additional elements, or by shifting perspective somewhat. Moreover, Benjamin discusses not only works of art but also nature and human beings with reference to "aura." "Aura," perhaps an element of a kind of *vie antérieure*,<sup>3</sup> stands for a mode of perception and experience—of nature, of Art, of other human beings—that has been, according to Benjamin, eradicated, one that

no longer obtains, if ever it did. "Aura" can be perceived only when one is barred from it, at the moment of its passing, its disintegration.<sup>4</sup> At any rate, in the "Work of Art" essay, "aura" is a web in which are woven the strands of "authenticity," "uniqueness," "singularity," and "authority" (219-223), attributes, too, it can hardly go unrecognized, of the individual subject. But perhaps the most important aspect of "aura" is to be found in the *distance* it manifests, its elusiveness and "inapproachability" (243).

We define. . . aura. . . as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be.  
If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, that branch (222-223).

The *authority* of "aura," that is to say, of the auratic object, has its source precisely in this distance which it creates and which exercises over the viewer the power of fascination. As a kind of withholding of itself, a withholding which both bestows and preserves the secretiveness of identity (inseparable from ontology), the auraticized object (whether natural or human) appears, uniquely and singularly, to transcend itself in its own presence, its own here-and-now, rendering its transcendence (and self-transcendence) an appearance: "aura" is exactly this transcendence-in-appearance, the non-phenomenality of a phenomenon.<sup>5</sup>

"Aura," however, is not simply the property or attribute—the *noli me tangere*—of the object, whether nature, the artwork, or another human being. Rather, "aura" characterizes an "experience"—a relationship and

<sup>1</sup> T.W. Adorno, "A Portrait of Walter Benjamin," in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), p. 231; see also pp. 235 and 239. I have slightly altered the translation.

<sup>2</sup> For the sake of convenience, page references, hereafter included parenthetically in the text, are to the version found in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), pp. 217-251. In the interest of greater precision, I have taken the liberty of slightly modifying the translation of certain passages.

<sup>3</sup> See Benjamin's discussion of Baudelaire's poem "La vie antérieure" in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. H. Zohn (London: Verso, 1983), pp. 141f.

<sup>4</sup> I have addressed the question of 'aura' in detail in *The Permanent Light of Eclipse: On Walter Benjamin's 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'*. M.A. Thesis, OISE/University of Toronto, 1991.

<sup>5</sup> See Rodolphe Gasche's "Objective Diversions: On Some Kantian Themes in Benjamin's 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Production,'" in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy*, ed. A. Benjamin and P. Osborne (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 185ff. for a useful and illuminating discussion of 'aura.'

a mode of perception and thinking which the hostility to it of contemporary social conditions has made visible for the first time. That is, these conditions have made it possible to understand "aura" as thoroughly historical. The evaporation of "aura," eliminating the illusion of the (self-) transcendent object, reveals that object to be no longer a "thing-in-itself" but just a *thing*. In the same way, the "withering of aura" removes from the spectator the metaphysical nimbus of "uniqueness," "singularity," and "authenticity." In a society and a world dominated by capitalist modes of mass-production and mass-consumption based on the multiple fungibility of things and people, these "precious" and "priceless" qualities of the individual subject become apparent as elements of an ideological apparatus which maintains them and distributes them as consolational sops. In such a society and such a world, "uniqueness," "singularity," and "authenticity" survive, but only in the hermetically-sealed forms of loneliness and alienation, the appearance of distance-in-presence, they spin within their self-preservation shells.

To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose "sense of the universal equality of things" has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction (223).

"Shock," for Benjamin, is just this experience of being "pried loose." In so far as film, through its techniques of cutaways, shifting angles of vision, montage, etc., incorporates shock as a formal principle, it not only resists unity and totality but also shatters, in its every movement, the unity of the subject who views it. While the auratic work of art reveres its viewer, who abandons himself/herself to his/her associations before it, thereby affirming his/her subjectivity, film assaults the subject. Thus, not only is a film an assemblage of fragments, but the viewer of film, unable to master and unify both the ceaseless onslaught of jolting images and his or her own responses to them, is likewise fragmented in the very act of seeing. "Shock," as a kind of counter-concept to "aura" entails the dissolution of just such a subjectivity as that which is produced and affirmed in the contemplation of the auratic work of art (237ff). In stark contrast to the contemplative experience the work of art invites, the mode of perception that is characteristic of the film audience is one of "distraction," owing to a film's presentation of non-stop "interruptions," "constant sudden changes" (239, 238). A film "happens" to its spectator, thus dissolving his/her control of the object as well as his/her self-control. To put this somewhat more pointedly: before a

film, members of its audience are *subjected* to a film; they are not its subjects.

One of the most audacious features of the "Work of Art" essay consists of the connection Benjamin implies between "distraction" (*Zerstreuung*) and knowing: "distraction" characterizes not only a film audience's state of reception, it also names the condition of the filmgoers' knowledge. Benjamin in no way disparages "distraction." To the contrary, he attributes to it a great importance. In complete opposition to the subject whose knowledge is the result of concentration—who concentrates and who is, in a sense concentrated before, an Artwork—the filmgoer is necessarily a *thoroughly distracted subject*, since the very nature of film makes concentration impossible. In its shock-like nature and its production of distraction, film reproduces and extends the shocking and distracting aspects of the streets, the factories, the shops, the newspapers, the crowds—in short, the everyday lives of those who comprise its audience, lives splintered into a series of discrete, repetitious moments that do not comprise a whole. Not only do the urban masses learn from such things, but they adapt them as they adapt to them—not by increased concentration but rather by a "heightened presence of mind" (238), and a critical attitude to reality that is habitual. The example of architecture provides, for Benjamin, proof-positive of a knowledge completely removed from concentration.

**Buildings are appropriated in a two-fold manner: by use and by perception—or, rather, by touch and by sight. Such appropriation cannot be understood in terms of the attentive concentration of a tourist before a famous building. On the tactile side there is no counterpart to contemplation. . . . Tactile appropriation is accomplished not so much by attention as by habit (240).**

One simply, habitually, and unself-consciously makes changes to the place one occupies, and thus transforms it. The small, everyday acts of transformation, those that are, for the most part, not registered as such, are, Benjamin seems to suggest, not as distant from large-scale emancipatory, revolutionary actions as has been claimed.

Perhaps the major value of film which emerges for Benjamin in the "Work of Art" essay is that it graphically presents the transmutability of people and things and renders such transmutability experienceable. In such an experience, nothing and no one is fixed, hallowed, or revered—the prerequisites for any notion of authority. This elimination, this destruction of any basis of authority is the foundation of Benjamin's "politics," a politics which cannot be easily or conveniently

understood by any conventional definition. In its radical implications, Benjamin's "politics" is equally an "apocalyptic anti-politics."<sup>6</sup> The destruction of authority is also the destruction of the tradition of authority. Thus, it is not simply the case, nor can it be, that the individual subject, self-directed and goal-oriented, is dissolved and simultaneously absorbed into a mass, collective subject capable, somehow, of retaining in an unproblematic manner an authoritative self-direction and goal-orientedness. The most pressing question concerning Benjamin's "politics" lays in the problems its practice, habitual and "absent-minded" (241) creates for just such a notion of the subject. For a subject merely collectivized would amount to nothing more than its re-auraticization, and that was—and is—and continues to be—the achievement of Fascism.

## II

The rationalization of experience into empiricities over which reason and its trustworthy sense, vision, dominate is a condition to which Benjamin is responding in the "The Work of Art" essay. Fascism is the culmination of this *anaesthetic*: "[Humanity's] self-alienation has reached such a degree that it is capable of experiencing its own destruction as an aesthetic enjoyment of the highest order" (242). The *anaesthetic* of Fascism colonizes the optical unconscious. The potential for such domination was clearly felt by Kracauer in 1927 when he wrote "The Mass Ornament." Therefore, at stake in the immanent critique of his essay is the possibility of undoing this alienation, not by avoiding the new technologies, but by *passing through them*.<sup>7</sup>

Until recently Kracauer's *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (1960) has generally been panned in film studies discourses for its "naive realism" (Dudley Andrews). Adorno also criticized the thinking as conservative, particularly in its embrace of Auerbach's theory of mimesis. Reading *Theory of Film* next to Kracauer's essays of the 1920s-1930s is quite literally a culture shock; gone in the 1960 book are all references to Taylorist modes of production, as well as the ideology critique such references provoke; gone too is the sense of productive spectatorship—a type of nascent reception theory based on the experience of being a part of this new public. It is as though the emigre experience forced underground—or vanquished—the dialectic complexity at the heart of the essayistic articulations of a new theory of apperception. In *Theory of Film* immanent critique seems to have been discarded in favour of an attempt to formalize an aesthetic system of film, to preserve its aura. But such polarities

between the early work and the late work, as well as between their aims and methods, become somewhat more complex if one reads retrospectively through *Theory of Film* to "The Mass Ornament", for what re-emerges then as problematic is precisely "the real" (reality, nature, physical reality and camera-reality are all used interchangeably): a concept which stands at the heart of both works, but which he treats differently.

In the opening section of *Theory of Film*, entitled "Photography," Kracauer offers critiques, consonant with his Weimar work, of both positivism and "naive realism" (a phrase used against his analysis by Dudley Andrews):

In nineteenth-century France the rise of photography coincided with the spread of positivism—an intellectual attitude...in perfect keeping with the ongoing processes of industrialization....[Regarding the aesthetic implications,] positivist mentality aspired to a faithful, completely impersonal rendering of reality.[...] Misled by the naive realism underlying [aestheticist and positivist attitudes], both sides failed to appreciate the kind and degree of creativeness that may go into a photographic record. Their common outlook prevented them from penetrating the essence of a medium which is neither imitation nor art in the traditional sense.[my emphasis]<sup>8</sup>

As with Benjamin, Kracauer's thinking about technical reproducibility involves a challenge to aestheticist conceptions of the value and function of art: he is, not surprisingly, as critical of "naive" realism as he is of "formative" (i.e., formalist) tendencies ("beautiful pictures"; "painterly styles and preferences"; "imitations of traditional art, not fresh reality" [p. 6]). Hence, we are left with the problem of understanding this new term since so much weight falls upon it: the "photographic record" of "fresh reality." The following quote sheds some light onto this problem: "First, modern photography has not only considerably enlarged our vision but, in doing so, adjusted it to man's situation in a technological age. A conspicuous feature of this situation is that the viewpoints and perspectives that framed our images

<sup>6</sup> See Anson Rabinbach, 'Introduction' to *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem (1932-1940)*, ed. Gershom Scholem, trans. A. Rabinbach and Andre Lelievre (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. xv.

<sup>7</sup> This is a paraphrase from an essay on Benjamin by Susan Buck-Morss ("Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," *October* 62 [Fall 1992]: 8).

<sup>8</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 5, 7.

of nature for long stretches of the past have become relative....not one single object has retained a fixed, definitely recognizable appearance" [my emphasis; pp. 8-9]. Realism, for Kracauer, is that artwork which responds (neither simply reflective nor expressive) to a reality utterly transformed by the technological, and this "reality" is not merely an objective or external world, but vision itself. This new experience of the real extends to "art": "By exploding perceptual traditions, modern photography has assumed another function—that of influencing art" [p. 9]. And it is notable that his example of "art" is Duchamp. Twentieth-century realism, for Kracauer, is not a "style" of art; it is an attitude toward the abstraction of a technological era. Hence, Duchamp, Eisenstein, Griffith, Godard, Kafka, Joyce, Woolf and Proust—these are all realists for Kracauer.

Because of the waning of ideology the world we live in is cluttered with debris, all attempts at new syntheses notwithstanding. There are no wholes in this world; rather it consists of bits of chance events whose flow substitutes for meaningful continuity. Correspondingly, individual consciousness must be thought of as an aggregate of splinters of beliefs and sundry activities; and since the life of the mind lacks structure, impulses from psychosomatic regions are apt to surge up and fill the interstices. Fragmentized individuals act out their parts in fragmentized reality. [297-98; Kracauer's sense of "ideology" refers to "binding norms," universal belief structures. (God and progress), see pp. 294-96]

As is evident with phrases like "meaningful continuity", Kracauer's analysis of the modern condition is propelled by the task of "passing through"—undergoing—the alienation without the illusion that is nostalgia. His provocation is the Holocaust. Much like Benjamin, he is searching for a mediating term which will redeem the sentience of physical reality, a term which will create a condition wherein "we can experience things in their concreteness" [296]. But, unlike Benjamin—who saw that possibility at the moment of its eclipse by Fascism—Kracauer in 1960 sees film as that which can permit experience to return: "[Film] effectively assists us in discovering the material world with its psychophysical correspondences. We literally redeem this world...by endeavouring to experience it through the camera. And we are free to experience it because we are fragmentized.... Its imagery permits us, for the first time, to take away with us the objects and occurrences that comprise the flow of material life" [p. 300]. Kracauer's "redemption" is the entwining of the primacy of the optical ("impulses from psychosomatic regions") with the "psy-

chophysical correspondences" of film.

Kracauer begins the book with an excerpt from Proust which describes the narrator's encounter with his dying grandmother [p. 14]. Kracauer uses the excerpt to elaborate his sense of experience as the permeation of abstractness and alienation, as well as to distinguish his sense of realism from notions of mirrored reality:

Photography, Proust has it, is the product of complete alienation. The onesidedness of this definition is obvious. Yet, the whole context suggests that Proust was primarily concerned with the depiction of a state of mind in which the impact of involuntary memories blurs the external phenomena touching them off.... There is no mirror at all. Photographs do not just copy nature but metamorphose it.... Yet if anything defies the idea of a mirror, it is not so much these unavoidable transformations...as the way we take cognizance of visible reality.... The photographer summons up his being, not to discharge it in autonomous creations but to dissolve it into the substances of the objects that close in on him. Once again, Proust is right: selectivity within the medium is inseparable from the processes of alienation. [pp. 15-16]

Proust is Kracauer's interlocutor throughout the book. This is so, not simply for his "filmic" sensibility, i.e., his multi-perspectivalism, but also for the primacy of the optical in the provocation of remembrance. But the rich texture of this entwining of past/present/future through a mimetic image as transformative thins as the book proceeds, leaving us at the end with a very problematic analogy regarding the Holocaust: he retells the myth of Medusa, stating that the "film screen is Athena's polished shield" [p. 305]. The analogy begins quite simply: just as the sight of Medusa turns men to stone, so too looking directly at actual horrors paralyzes us with fear. "Now of all of the existing media the cinema alone holds up a mirror to nature. Hence our dependence on it for the reflection of happenings which would petrify us were we to encounter them in real life." Perseus, "the image watcher," overcomes his fears by looking at the reflection: "The mirror reflections of horror are an end in themselves. As such they beckon the spectator to take them in and thus incorporate into his memory the real face of things too dreadful to be beheld in reality.... In experiencing...the litter of tortured human bodies, we redeem this horror from its invisibility behind the veils of panic and imagination." This is a puzzling analogy for two reasons: 1) the film screen is *Athena's* shield; 2) Perseus does not succeed in "laying the ghost for good", Medusa's *decapitata*.

*tion* does not end her influence, for Athena affixes the head to her aegis so as to "throw a scare in her enemies". Athena represents the "victory" of reason, the abstraction of the mind from the body, the reign of patriarchal justice; a reign which is by no means far from horror. Reason is closer to violence than it would like to admit. Hence, Athena's shield is far from neutral; it distorts an already distorted reality.

In the 1926 essay "The Cult of Distraction," Kracauer made a similar point more strongly:

One chides the Berliners for being addicted to distraction, but this is a petit-bourgeois reproach. While the addiction to distraction is certainly greater in Berlin than in the provinces, the tension to which the working masses are subjected is also greater and more tangible—an essentially formal tension which fills their day fully without making it fulfilling. Such a lack demands to be compensated, but this need can only be articulated in terms of the same surface sphere which imposed the lack in the first place. The form of entertainment necessarily responds to that of enterprise.<sup>9</sup>

The polemical tone of this essay, as well as "The Mass Ornament" (1927) is aimed equally against capitalist modes of production as it is against the custodians of high culture. The reason for the latter has nothing to do with taste, rather, like Benjamin, the defense of high culture merely prolongs the status quo, a prolongation Kracauer rightly recognizes as dangerous: "The laws and forms of the idealist culture that haunt us today as a mere specter may have lost their legitimacy with the advent of the motion picture; nonetheless, out of the very elements of externality into which they had happily advanced, they are attempting to create a new idealist culture" [CDist., 95]. The stakes here are high: Will cinema become a tool of social domination or will its dissolution of "idealism" necessarily inform and contribute to an emancipatory moment? The notion of the masses addiction to distraction as an aesthetic force of production depends upon the recognition that the "bearers of the ornaments are the masses"; that they do not participate in conceiving it, yet they bring it about; and that the "mass ornament is the aesthetic reflex of rationality aspired to by the prevailing economic system."<sup>10</sup> In the mass ornament, "in pure externality, the audience encounters itself; its own reality is revealed in the fragmented sequence of splendid sense impressions. Were this reality to remain hidden from the audience, they could neither attack nor change it; its disclosure in distraction is therefore of moral significance" [CDist., 94].

As a journalist, Kracauer adopted an essayistic

method of analysis which permitted him to move across the surface of the "pure externality" of his contemporary Berlin, to find himself as part of the mass, and have access to the "infinitely interpretable" phenomena of daily life. The experience of anonymity and the participation in the "homogeneous cosmopolitan audience" promotes the "exodus of the human figure from sumptuous organic splendor" and the demise of concepts such as personality and the self-identical subject. The anti-organicist streak in these early works evolves from his somewhat optimistic view of reason as that which can free us from the persistent snares of mythical thought. In the "Mass Ornament" he states: "Reason will bring truth to the world." He senses that the rationality of capitalism has not gone far enough to rid thought of nature's grip, instead it perpetuates the myth that social organization is natural; and it is in this self-enclosed system that the mass ornament resides in its "muteness." As a journalist, then, he saw his task as that of provoking the masses into self-reflection, into disenchantment, not through the rejection of new technologies and social configurations, but rather, "through the mass ornament, not away from it" [MO, 76].

As Heide Schlupmann has articulated, *Theory of Film* "adopts the viewpoint taken in the Weimar essays, but in terms of this viewpoint having been lost. Whereas talk of the all-out-gamble that is history harbors the messianic hope that a history that has since become a catastrophe will be redeemed, that "catastrophe" has now come to pass, without the Messiah having arrived—that is unless he is hidden, as Kafka suggests at the end of his novel *Amerika*, in the shabby American culture of entertainment."<sup>11</sup>

*Both authors wish to acknowledge the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for their Doctoral Fellowships.*

<sup>9</sup>Kracauer, "The Cult of Distraction," trans. Thomas Levin, *New German Critique* 40: 93. Levin points out that Kracauer plays with the ambiguity of the word *Betrieb*, which can mean both enterprise (business) and entertainment.

<sup>10</sup>Kracauer, "The Mass Ornament" (1927), trans. Barbara Cornell and Jack Zipes, *New German Critique* 5 (Spring 1975): 68-69, 70.

<sup>11</sup>Heide Schlupmann, "The Subject of Survival: On Kracauer's *Theory of Film*," *New German Critique* 54 (Fall 1991): 113.



## *Visions of Light: The Art of Cinematography*

An interview with Arnold Glassman, Todd McCarthy and Stuart Samuels

The following interview took place on September 18, 1992, the day after *Visions of Light* premiered at The Toronto Festival of Festivals. We thank The Toronto Film Festival for their assistance in organizing the interview, Pamela Edgecombe for her transcription and Robin Wood for his participation. We also wish to thank Arnold Glassman, Todd McCarthy and Stuart Samuels. It was a genuine pleasure to meet them and discuss their film. The interview was conducted by Florence Jacobowitz and Richard Lippe.

**Richard Lippe:** I thought we might start by having you introduce yourselves and give a little background information and then tell us something about how the film came about. I mean, who initiated the project and how did the three of you get together?

**Todd McCarthy:** Well, I'm Todd McCarthy, and I've been a critic for *Variety* for quite a few years, and a film historian, and did a book called *Kings of the B*, many years ago, a 'B' movie anthology. And from my point of view, it came out of two articles that I did for *Film Comment* on cinematographers [Ed.: Summer 1972, April 1984]; one, about seven years ago and then another one two years ago. So they were at five year intervals. And maybe I'll just keep doing that for the next couple decades. But, I've always had a strong interest in cinematography and in the second article I did, I noticed that the best assignments, in other words, the top directors, were mostly choosing foreign cinematographers and this had been a major shift, I thought, since five years before, when let's say the Pantheon, or the top cinematographers that you could identify, were mostly American. Or there were people who had worked up from the 60's into the 80's. And now all these foreign trained cinematographers had really taken over the top positions and it was a major seat change, so I thought that was very worth looking in to - and it basically sprang out of a documentary that I worked on, called *Hollywood Mavericks*, which NHK (a Japanese broadcasting company) and the American Film Institute had been involved with. And both parties were interested in doing another film, and again on cinema. And this is one that I was very interested in doing. And then, Arnie and Stuart can tell you how they came into it as well.

**Stuart Samuels:** I'm Stuart Samuels. Before working in production, I was a Professor of Film History and had a knowledge based on film, and also wrote a book on 'midnight movies'. I had also been working with NHK on a number of projects on high definition. So I had both film background and technical background in terms of HD so the AFI hired me to produce this, and then we hired Arnie as the editor. Arnie had submitted a tape of his previous work - a really interesting film - and then Arnie was hired and then as the process got going, we all became more involved in the creative process of putting it together - and Arnie takes it from there.

**Arnold Glassman:** I'm Arnold Glassman, the editor/co-director, and I've been an editor for a long time on everything from features to documentaries to T.V. news, and I had just moved to Los Angeles. This was a dream project for someone who had just moved to Los Angeles, and I knew of Todd through his book *Kings of the B*, which I had for many years, and we all got together and proceeded to work on the film. It was exciting to land in Los Angeles and get to know where all the old films were buried, and work at the AFI, and have a project that went on this long, which was both a blessing and a first.

**Richard:** How long did it take you to put the film together?

**Todd:** Exactly two years.

**Stuart:** Two years from the first shooting.

**Arnie:** I would say the editing process took about ten months. The clip gathering process took three months. We did the high definition version in Tokyo which took three weeks to do the on-line. There was a long pause, and then I proceeded to put together the 35mm version, which took a few months.

**Florence Jacobowitz:** You are all listed as the directors. How did you work collaboratively on the film? How did you separate the tasks? Who chose which films to highlight? Did it work according to cinematographers? For instance, did you interview Nestor Almendros and then decide to include clips from *Days of Heaven*, because he spoke about it? How did you make those decisions?

**Todd:** Well, I was initially involved in structuring the whole thing and then Stuart and I also had a very intensive session in structuring in what we thought the entire piece should read. Now doing a documentary you have to write some kind of structure/script for it, but the finished film is never going to end up according to that script. But you lay something out, and we had to go through film history - and particularly American/international film history, relatively chronologically according to influences. And I had a sense too, of which cinematographers might be able to speak most intelligently about certain things. And if you just read Nestor Almendros' book for instance, you know that he had an encyclopedic knowledge of cinema. He founded the first ciné club in Havana, and was a film critic before he was a cinematographer. So I knew that was the kind of thing we could get from him, and there were other people too who could speak about that. So, when we created the questions for the individual cinematographers, we tried to create questions that would elicit answers that would give us what we needed in certain areas. We knew there were a lot of areas we had to cover, and we constructed the questions accordingly. But obviously a lot of it was dictated by what they felt like talking about as well.

**Stuart:** We had a unique situation because we had pretty much carte-blanche in terms of what films we could use because of the relationship of AFI to the studios. And that allowed us a great sense of freedom, so we could ask questions about things and that we knew we could get prints of the films from them.

**Arnie:** And the structure of the film no matter how much you plan when you do a documentary finally comes down to what you have to work with. And I structured the whole thing based on using the transcripts from the inter-

views, categorizing it chronologically - breaking it down to films, to subjects - and then started a rough cut based on the interviews only, which was like, two hours or more. Then there were sections that went out, sections that went back in. Then of course, the clips were dictated a lot in the major sections by what was discussed. I'd go home at night and go to the video store and take home ten films every night, and sit and watch, and scan, and find clips that I thought would work - and those that I remembered since I was born. We'd try to get everything in there. Some things worked beautifully, some things that we had didn't, and I'm very happy that the train shot from *Possessed* worked. It was one of the things I really wanted to get in. So, to me it was both working with the material and it was also a personal thing. Getting things in that were important to me.

**Florence:** It struck us that way.

**Arnie:** Just speaking from the editor's point of view - that's what the process was.

**Todd:** But I might add that, another motivation for this was that it was almost entirely virgin territory. I mean, no one's ever seen what these people look like or how they speak. I can only think of a couple of books with extensive interviews with cinematographers. So I think that was part of the exciting aspect, to break new ground with these people who I believe are the most articulate people within a given craft, in any area of Hollywood film making, that I've ever come across. These cinematographers know their history, they know the work of their contemporaries, because they have to keep up with what everyone else is doing. There's a very, I find, friendly competition, among these people. They all belong to the same society, they to some extent hang out together, and share their secrets, share their discoveries and so on. And of course they're all competing for the same jobs too. So, that's an interesting situation. But by and large, there's a camaraderie, but a competitive one. The interesting thing is, that we had hoped that we might be able to find old interviews of some of the old time cinematographers. By rights, this film should have been done ten or fifteen years ago when a lot of these people were still around. They all lived to be 80 or 90 years old. But they died within the last ten years or so. And there's really nothing - that James Wong Howe footage you saw, is about all we had on film, of one of the old great cinematographers. So that was unfortunate. Yet, we were able to get these people in the film to speak about them - I thought rather well. You can see still the chain of influences on the history of cinematography even though we don't have many of the old timers still around.

**Florence:** That was one of our questions. You make this clear distinction between classical Hollywood and new Hollywood and you connect contemporary cinematography to foreign influences, like the New Wave cinematog-

rapher Raoul Coutard. But we wanted to ask you to elaborate on how you perceive the *continuities* between classical Hollywood and new Hollywood. You do a bit of that in tracing a history from *Sunrise* and other films....

**Arnie:** Well, the simple thing I had in mind is that - here is a history of cinematography. Suddenly, the people telling the story become a part of the history. That was the hinge that we built upon, where it goes from the history to the personal stories. And the 50's was the dark hole that we kind of had to bridge with information describing what these guys were rebelling against. The difficult thing was how could we show examples of the brightly-lit films that they were rebelling against, and not present them as negative examples. That was very difficult.

**Richard:** Is that one of the reasons that there weren't any examples from musicals, such as Minnelli musicals like *An American in Paris*? I was thinking about the *An American in Paris* ballet sequence and stylization.

**Arnie:** Which would have been quite interesting in the context of the other John Alton clips that we showed. Alton in fact shot that. You'd kind of be showing it as an anomaly or an aberration.

(Ed. note: Alton has been strongly identified with his *film noir* cinematography.)

**Richard:** Just in general going back to the question of musicals and stylization, you only have the excerpt from an early Warner Brothers musical, the Busby Berkeley sequence. And then you kind of drop musicals out.

**Todd:** I think it's partly because we didn't have any exponents of that style speaking in the film. And no one that we interviewed mentioned it as being significant to the work they were doing. It would have been an effort given the material we had, to drag it into the film.

**Arnie:** And we didn't want to use a narration. So we had to stick to the segue to colour. We had a lot of discussions on what the great colour films were, and what we could use and what would be useful. We created a little bridge where we went to Allen Daviau and John Bailey. We paraphrased some things they said to give us a bridge into that sequence - explaining the colour, explaining the transition to wide screen. And then, I thought how am I going to get a great MGM musical in there? It was very hard to think of a place. So, *Meet Me in St. Louis* was sort of the bow to that. Just that opening shot - there was lovely colour in that opening shot.

**Stuart:** But I also think the film moves from a cinematographer's view of the past which is what the first part of the film does - even though Charles Lang is in there as an exponent of his own work - to, as Arnie says, the cinematographers' view of their own work. Then there's a shift to the people we talked about, those who were

rebelling against the Hollywood system. They were the ones who really made the new rules up. And I think that the film reflects that kind of vision. So that to go back and try to explain or to illustrate the old stuff except as the Greg Tolands, the James Wong Howes, was I thought, dragging it down. Because we were interested in keeping it moving. We wanted to go beyond the film buff or film studies audience, to a much larger audience.

**Richard:** I was wondering (I'm not really an expert) but who is Harry Wolf? I don't recognize the name.

**Arnie:** He was an assistant cameraman/crew person at the Selznick studio.

**Richard:** I knew most of the names that were mentioned and the people who were interviewed. But he didn't strike a chord.



"*The Last Emperor*;" Vittorio Storaro, cinematographer

**Arnie:** He happened to be in the right places, at the right time - rather than a major contributor.

**Todd:** He saw a lot happening. He knew what was happening even if he didn't make that kind of name for himself. He's also important in the ASC (American Society of Cinematographers).

**Stuart:** And he worked with Selznick, and his recollections were interesting.

**Florence:** Do you think some of these cinematographers have become stars in a way, in their own right? Like Robbie Müller or Vittorio Storaro - Do certain directors now search out cinematographers to work with them and bolster/legitimize a project? Do you see that happening?

**Todd:** That's absolutely the case. There are many directors I think, in fact who you might say are cinematographer snobs. I mean, they have to have the so called glamorous, sexy names on their work to give their films a certain look. If you look at a lot of directors, I mean, Bertolucci, and Coppola (Florence: Woody Allen) yeah, it's very much the case. And sure, when you hear Storaro speaking - he's incredibly absorbed. I mean, if you heard the entire interview - he's got his whole career sort of thought out in this wildly philosophical way in which each stage of his career is meaningful - and after *Apocalypse Now*, he had to take two years off because that was the end of something, and then he could go into the next



"E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial." Allen Daviau, cinematographer

stage of his career. And Bertolucci, I'm sure it has everything to do with Bertolucci's psychoanalysis in the way Storaro ties into that and the stages of their lives somehow go in unison. And that he couldn't have shot for instance, *The Conformist* now and he couldn't have shot *The Last Emperor* before, because it was all part of this overall philosophical journey, that they are sort of pursuing together. And he felt - he even said when Bertolucci left to do *Tragedy of a Ridiculous Man* without Storaro, the morning of the start of shooting, Storaro felt a pang of jealousy and betrayal as if Bertolucci was sleeping with someone else or something. It's that intense. So, yeah, you do get that with some of these people. And they are superstars in their own field, and they certainly have egos and stuff, and yet, they don't have the kind of unbridled egotism of directors because they do see themselves as doing a job and serving a function in a picture which is inevitably collaborative. So, in fact many of the cinematographers said that they had the best job in the world. Nestor said that for one. Because they didn't have to

worry about a thousand things every day as a director does. Everyone is coming up to the director asking questions all the time. They don't have to deal with the studios. They don't have to deal with money. And so on and so forth. They can just do their job. They can just think about light. They can just think about aesthetic matters. And they love that. They just have a terrific job, they're very well paid, they can work when they feel like it, they can not work when they don't want to. The successful ones are quite satisfied, I think, except for the ones who are frustrated directors.

**Richard:** I know Michael Chapman has done a couple of films but generally cinematographers don't make the move to becoming directors which is kind of interesting given on the one hand their intimacy with all these areas - I mean, production design, and actors, and photographing actors, and the script and all that. You would think that there would be a desire to move on to directing.



"Raw Deal," cinematographer, John Alton

**Stuart:** Some of them have. Barry Sonnenfeld, Sven Nykvist have directed, Vilmos Zsigmond just directed a film, Ernest Dickerson just directed a film.

**Todd:** Some of them only directed one or two and that was it - Gordon Willis, Michael Chapman.

**Stuart:** But I think it has to do with the fact that the aesthetic look of a film has become much more important and you can almost have a whole film based on that. So that a director, who feels very secure in terms of an aesthetic and maybe less secure in terms of dealing with actors, like Vilmos or someone like that, could see making a film that was primarily visual and not worry about the other elements as much.

**Todd:** There's another level that came out in many of the interviews which isn't in the film. A number of the cinematographers kind of poo-pooed the difficulty of it. They said these days it's easy - the equipment is so simple. The equipment is so good now, the film is so good, lighting is

much more simple than it used to be, colour is much easier to look good than black and white, it's not so tough. That's kind of their attitude so they were almost cutting down the glorification of this role. Whereas they might well have glorified what Lee Garmes and William Daniels might have done. These days they say, well it's not so hard to make a good looking film.

**Richard:** When Haskell Wexler was talking about James Wong Howe, he said that Howe's attitude was 'we just did our job and made movies'. It was very nice that he said that. He came across as very relaxed about the whole thing, and was willing to be open, and struck a balance in the way he was responding to the questions. And I thought that his point was well taken, that there's this change over - this issue we were talking about before - where they've become now these superstars within their own area.

**Todd:** But doesn't that fit the attitude of the old

Hollywood directors, I mean, Raoul Walsh and Hawks and people like that would only speak about doing their job and if you started talking about art they'd tell you to get lost.

**Florence:** Not Sternberg.

**Todd:** No, Certainly not.

**Arnie:** Well Stephen Burum had a lot to say about it - we didn't use it in the film. He was at UCLA during the late 40's, early 50's, when the Fox people were teaching there. And they were taken to the Fox lot. And he got to know all the cinematographers - Arthur Miller, and Leon Shamroy, and they were part of his education. He describes them as being very gruff, not talking about what they did as art, and he admired them for that attitude.

**Todd:** Unfortunately they're not in the film, because they're all dead now, but it was known as a pretty macho, tough-guy profession. And yet, they were doing something very sensitive or artistic in a sense, but they're all pretty tough guys, and they're all kind of known as ladies men, and there was no sort of getting in - other types had trouble getting in, during the old studio days. It was a closed shop. It was limited to a few dozen men who were doing that job and you couldn't break in from the early 30's to the early 60's really.

**Florence:** Has that changed a lot? Didn't you have a woman cinematographer on *Visions of Light*?

**Todd:** It has changed a great deal.

**Stuart:** Yeah, but also the fact that Hollywood was everything. There really wasn't an alternative city. New York was at best an experimental film group. That's why I think it's really valuable in terms of the film, its making an argument about the New York look being more than just an aesthetic situation. It's really a physical rebellion against Hollywood, it's a technological rebellion against it, and as well, it's the entry point for Europe (which L.A. is not) in terms of influences.

**Arnie:** You get someone like William Daniels who shot Garbo and then went on to New York (**Richard:** for his on-location shooting of *The Naked City*) and got an Oscar.

**Todd:** Gordon Willis also said that he could not pursue his visual experimentation in Hollywood, he had to do it in New York, and there was great resistance to him for years, and he was not nominated for an Oscar when *The Godfather* was winning all these other awards. He was always ignored.

**Richard:** Do you think the audiences who see this film and have varying degrees of awareness and interest in cine-

matography and in Hollywood appreciate some of the issues you're raising or do you think they need to be spelled out more? For instance, the New York look exemplified by Gordon Willis which emerges in the late 60's and continues thereafter, versus the classical studio look.

**Stuart:** Do you mean making it a more pronounced situation?

**Arnie:** Except that, that New York look was going on even after Conrad Hall and Haskell Wexler were in Hollywood, so it was not something that just happened in the 40's, since we have clips that carry on through, you know, Gordon Willis. It was just a way of getting a segment to include a lot of material that just didn't fit elsewhere.

**Todd:** I think we made a strong effort to show the many different influences that come in. Vilmos and Laszlo Kovacs came in through motorcycle films, exploitation films like *Easy Rider*. Kovacs had shot *Easy Rider* because he had shot motorcycle exploitation films before that. There was a section, there is a whole subject that the film doesn't explore which could have been interesting, but it probably would have been adventurous, and that is, the subject of cinematography as a career. In other words, the closed union of all those years. Why didn't more people get in? Why did things stagnate a bit from the late 40's and into the 50's. How difficult it was to establish a career. Why were there no women - it was the last part/the last profession in Hollywood where there were no women, I would say. And that kind of thing could have maybe been covered in a ten or fifteen minute segment, but I think that it might have been too much of just a profession, and not dealing with the real artistic influences, which is what we went with.

**Arnie:** And it probably was the last thing to be omitted of the other stuff, because there were comments, even right down to Allen Daviau who shot Steve Spielberg's *Amblin'* and then he couldn't work with Spielberg until *E.T.* because of the unions and that's much later.

**Stuart:** Yeah, we had a section on unions and black-listing and some other things, but we were pretty faithful to the notion of wanting to have the film grow out of the conversations with the cinematographers, rather than imposing some kind of thesis on it - which would have been necessary if we had tried to put all these things together and tried to make some sense of it.

**Arnie:** You know there are a lot of interesting stories about what these people did in the beginning. It was Conrad Hall who worked on T.V. and Allen Daviau shot dance films, at some local California dance show.

**Todd:** Owen Roizman doing fashion, all that kind of thing.

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**Stuart:** Almost by accident in many cases, a lot of these people got into this - because they had already trained for it, you know.

**Arnie:** So wherever we were able to inject some of that, we did.

**Richard:** I was also struck by the fact that people like Conrad Hall and Gordon Willis are now the establishment. They're in their fifties or older. In a way it was kind of a shock, because I still think of these people as they were, as being young. And to see them actually there up on the screen, and to realize that they are part of a new sort of elite or hierarchy, and they are now being followed by a generation of photographers. They have become institutions.

**Todd:** That was part of the problem of the apprenticeship system, because by the time you could actually get to shoot a picture, you were well into your forties and you'd served all this time as a loader, or a focus puller, assistant cameraman, and all that, an operator, and finally you could work your way up. It was only when things opened up with exploitation films, could young kids in their late twenties, early thirties get in and start shooting pictures. If by chance one of them was recognized or if you were Vilmos or Laszlo Kovacs and shooting a motorcycle film and then had a big break like *Easy Rider*, then you were on the map. That kind of thing couldn't happen in the earlier years. A lot of these people, William Fraker and Conrad Hall, were probably at least forty when they even started shooting at all.

**Arnie:** When Wexler shot *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, they called him a kid, and he was in his thirties.

**Todd:** Even Nestor was over thirty when he started working with the New Wave. Directors tend to be able to start younger than cameramen. But it's not true any more. I mean, someone like Caleb Deschanel started very, very young and he was instantly a star.

**Florence:** Could you talk a bit about how some of these roles blur or overlap? I was thinking of the section of the film where Storaro was talking about *The Last Emperor*, and the use of colour for instance. Who makes some of those decisions, that green means this or red means this? Is it the cinematographer, the director, the art director, the set designer? Where do you start making distinctions between these roles?

**Todd:** Well, Storaro is the only one who went into these issues at such great length, and he was so articulate about it. I'm sure there was a collaboration between him and Bertolucci.

**Stuart:** This whole idea of basing a film on colours of the spectrum in terms of how you organize it, how you struc-

ture it, I'm sure was a decision that had to do with Bertolucci; but the idea of dealing with someone's life and then lighting it in terms of the different hues, so that you change colours to produce a sub-text that really tells a story, more than the actual history itself. He's unique in that way.

**Arnie:** But his whole description of the colour scheme only carried through to a certain point in the film.

**Todd:** I think it's rare that you find a group of filmmakers that aestheticized - who are going to think things through to that extent. However, this has reminded me that perhaps you could find equivalents in Hollywood musicals. Because I think if you had a director like Minnelli, he would think about progressions of colour, co-ordination of colours, and so on. And then you get this thing with Bertolucci - I think if we sat and talked about it we could probably come up with a few more examples, and I'm sure that even though he didn't work in colour, von Sternberg would have thought about fabrics and lenses and lights and the interplay of all these factors - there's no doubt about it. But I think it's a rare case. And I think someone like Bertolucci, to continue that example, tends to work with the same designers all the time - cameraman, costume-designer, production designer and so on - if possible. And the ideal case in a film that's that complicated and that ambitious, is that you get all those people on board well in advance so that they can collaborate and plan out these things. It's not the kind of thing you can do, if you get your money and two weeks later you have to start shooting. But if you're planning a project for years, you know the way Frederick Elmes talked about *Blue Velvet* - they were able to trash through and articulate and explore what they really were looking for visually, and in many cases the result shows on the screen. But it's a rare case where you'll find it that deeply thought through.

**Richard:** The other thing your film seems to articulate, is that the medium has become a director's area. I mean, individual stars don't get mentioned. Nobody talks about lighting Meryl Streep, or anything like that. It's working with Scorsese or with Bertolucci or working with Coppola. Nobody talks about working in a genre in which they specialize. It seems to all be geared to the director....

**Stuart:** I think that one of the interesting things about the cinematographers is that, they grow up with the directors in many cases. You know, the relationship goes way back with a lot of these people even prior to their own decisions of career choices, and they rely on that sort of trust. I think that's the case with Elmes, and Dickerson who worked with Spike Lee. They grew up together in establishing their position in the medium. Bertolucci has a unique kind of rapport that you can't have with the star, but that you can have with the director and the cinematographer.

**Arnie:** I think that a lot of the directors and cinematographers are trying to break out of the genre mould. Scorsese has Michael Chapman, and then when he uses Michael Ballhaus or Laszlo Kovacs his films differ from his other films, which is interesting. I think they sometimes choose cinematographers so they don't get pigeon-holed. They want to get that foreign look, or they want to get that look that their favorite director had - like Woody Allen and Bergman.

**Florence:** I was wondering about some of the directors you left out. I think you mentioned Jordan Cronenweth. But you don't really talk about Ridley Scott, or Michael Cimino.

**Todd:** Well, Jordan Cronenweth, has a physical impairment; he's on medication, and had a very hard time in the interview. We wanted to include the interview but finally we didn't because he didn't want it included but we still put in a clip from *Blade Runner* just to acknowledge it. It just didn't prove possible in that case. When we interviewed Vilmos Zsigmond we talked at length about Cimino, but somehow it didn't fit into the structure of the film.

**Robin Wood:** In *Heaven's Gate* there's that wonderful transition into gold when they are rollerskating. A magical scene in the original version - it's not in the re-cut version.

**Stuart:** There are also some directors who don't like to work with very strong cinematographers. We found that interesting. Spielberg for example, and some of the other directors. Because they want a young cinematographer who they can manipulate.

**Arnie:** We had an interview, a short interview with Spielberg where he states that. And here we have Alan Daviau and Dean Cundey, people who have worked with him and we couldn't exactly say that Spielberg had made this statement.

**Todd:** One point I make in at least one of my cinematography articles is that, there are a few directors, including Ridley Scott, and you might include John Boorman and others, who have visual styles that are so strong, so pronounced that it doesn't really matter who shoots their films, because their work is going to come out looking great anyway. And that again, would have been difficult to explore unless you talked to those directors, but some directors are that strong.

**Florence:** That's an interesting point because it's so obvious in Ridley Scott's films.

**Richard:** The two people who worked with Polanski (John Alonzo and William Fraker) talked about his strong vision, and how they were unprepared for what he was

doing. The examples they gave were nicely illustrated with the clips you used. They both have this admiration for Polanski's visual sense: It kind of leaves us in awe of his skills. He knew what he wanted and what he wanted was something really good. It really had something going for it. I thought they were very articulate and precise about how Polanski's visuals worked in regard to the film.

**Arnie:** They articulated what a director does, more than a lot of directors do.

**Richard:** That's what I meant. They had a real comprehension of why that worked. It was also nice to hear them say that initially they didn't understand what was going on, but in hindsight they saw what Polanski was after and gave him credit for that kind of awareness.

**Florence:** I think you should have mentioned Sternberg.

**Todd:** If we start getting into films that we liked to have had, I mean, for our own satisfaction, we could easily have had a three or four hour film.

**Arnie:** In some cases we would have to chose a segment for a cinematographer, and in Vilmos Zsigmond's case, we thought *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* was essential.

**Stuart:** One of the things that is very useful in the film, which we wanted from the beginning, was to illustrate certain things, like flashing, day-for-night, and the magic hour, or even deep focus. In the film, each one of these terms is actually defined, with illustration in a way that really stays with you.

**Richard:** When you showed that shot from *Citizen Kane*, the extraordinary shot with the deep focus, I was thinking how contemporary film does not use deep focus so much. Did anybody actually bring up the question of deep focus? I mean, the present day photographers? Because it is something that seems to have been lost in filmmaking.

**Arnie:** I think it would require the director to know how to direct actors more. And I think that's a lost art in the way that it was done in *Citizen Kane*. I saw *The Little Foxes* recently, and it's incredible the way the whole thing was directed, and Toland's work in that.

**Todd:** Yeah, because it's not just a matter of technique. Deep focuses are easy to achieve now, with what they have, but it all has to do with your staging within the frame. And that's what's gone. And it also has to do with the fact that in black and white, you get the separations of the blacks and the whites and the distances. Whereas in colour, everything can kind of mesh together a little bit more, so the depth is perhaps not as pronounced, unless you really intelligently set up the shot.

**Arnie:** I think, those concerns have been replaced by

tricky Steadicam shots. Instead of the actors moving, the camera moves.

**Stuart:** For instance, the long eight minute take that opens *The Player*.

**Robin:** Isn't there a very basic material reason for using this too? That nowadays, in order to recoup their money films have to be sold to video, and have to be sold to television. And deep focus doesn't come across on television. You have all this flat shooting, everything has to look like a t.v. movie.

**Todd:** Well that has to do with another issue which didn't make it into the film, but was raised by Vílmós Zsigmond. After having done so much distinguished wide screen work, with Cimino, Altman, Spielberg and others, he said (after *Two Jakes*, I believe,) that he was not going to shoot in wide screen anymore, because he was fed up with seeing the films going to video and being compromised visually. Now, I have noticed however, that a few more films are being shot wide screen, let's say this year and last year, than were being shot that way, say three, four or five years ago. And I think it might have something to do with the fact that the work can be preserved on laser disc now. So if the cinematographers really care, it'll be seen that way there, and if it suits the film, then why not go ahead and use it. So Vílmós might change his tune. That was, I thought, a very significant comment - that he just wouldn't shoot in scope anymore.

**Stuart:** I think also the device of deep focus gives the viewer a lot more freedom in the frame, than what most contemporary cinema is about, which is to direct the viewer in a more manipulative way, for instance, through action sequences - (Florence: faster editing) faster editing, and all of that.

**Florence:** You have to allow for longer takes as well.

**Robin:** Directly connected with that - it's not only the deep focus, but the loss of expressive camera movement. Nowadays when you get very striking camera movements, it's a bit of smart-ass, show-off rhetoric. Like the opening shots of *The Player* and *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. - It's saying "Look I can do this..." ...The kind of thing you've got in a film like *Letter From an Unknown Woman* or in *The Reckless Moment* (I think Burnett Guffey should've been mentioned in there somewhere) is just lost. It isn't there anymore.

**Todd:** I think we've entered the era of promiscuous camera movement. Where it doesn't really mean anything.

**Stuart:** Just as long as there's movement.

**Arnie:** Well, if you compare the long Steadicam shots in *Raging Bull* or *Goodfellas*, wonderful shots - to an empty

Stedicam shot like the one opening *The Bonfire of the Vanities* - it has to do with information being directed.

**Stuart:** I was reading this morning about Woody Allen's film, *Husbands and Wives* where the camera movements are so jittery that they had to put on the cans "There's Nothing Wrong With Your Projector".

**Richard:** Also, I think this brings up this question of special effects. Last night at the screening, afterwards in the question/answer session, somebody asked why you didn't include any science-fiction films. Obviously they were thinking of special effects films in which the camera work is categorized as awe-inspiring because it looks so real. This is another whole area, that has, I think, much different concerns...

**Stuart:** Actually, we're seriously thinking about following this with a work on special effects. It's a different kind of manipulation of the image, that needs a lot more explanation and examples.

**Florence:** Is that the cinematographer's role?

**Arnie:** One person whom we interviewed who was hurt because we excluded him was Linwood Dunn. He discussed working with Toland in *Citizen Kane*, and I thought his contribution would be a supplement to the Greg Toland sequence, but he went on and on about his ideas and took a lot of credit for a lot of those shots. (Florence: If your partner is dead, I guess it's easy to take the credit.) We could have developed that much further, but there was no way to include that as a detail. It had to be developed much more extensively and therefore, we just decided to not include it at all. But he did explain how Greg Toland just took it so far and he had to take over at a certain point - which in a lot of cases, was probably true.

**Todd:** And of course there are cinematographers who are specifically attracted to that kind of film. So some are into these technical problems and solving them and trickery and so on, and others are much more into the pure aesthetics of setting up and lighting shots.

**Stuart:** It's less about light, which is really a theme of this film, it's optical, it's a difference of process.

**Robin:** I'd like to see a film about what has been lost. About deep focus and camera movement - which would be wonderful to do.

**Arnie:** Well, like shooting under low light conditions, like the shot in *The Grapes of Wrath*. It was done without the benefit of fast film and the detail in the background of that shot is more magical than some things that are done nowadays under the same conditions.

**Richard:** I had just seen *The Big Combo* recently and was struck by the opening and the closing sequences. The wonderful opening sequence of Jean Wallace being pursued down an alley is just extraordinary to see. It's just great.

**Stuart:** That's the film that nobody wanted, nobody cared about.

**Todd:** John Alton is still alive. He's 91 or 92 years old. He quit cinematography years ago. He refuses all entreaties to speak. Allegedly he's finishing an autobiography with a young guy who's helping him out. But he's refused all invitations to film festivals and Telluride tried to get him numerous times. And he just will not be interviewed. He went into painting and he claims that he's just left his interest in cinematography way behind.

**Richard:** When does his career end? In the late 50's, early 60's?

**Todd:** Yeah.

**Stuart:** When did his book come out? The book is used by so many people who have mentioned it.

**Todd:** It's rare - it's the first book on cinematography and it's very expensive - the early 50's I think.

**Arnie:** The photo we used was from the book jacket. The Academy in L.A. had the jacket but not the book. And that's the only photograph I can find of him.

**Todd:** He even dropped out of the ASC.

**Arnie:** He went on to do *An American in Paris*, and received an Oscar after all those *films noirs*.

**Todd:** There was a book about the making of *An American in Paris*, where they got everyone, except Alton.

**Richard:** Todd, I just read your review of *The Public Eye*. You make an equation between the material and the look of a film. You're saying that the film has very gritty material and Howard Franklin shot it film with a very elegant look. You say this is a problem, and since I haven't seen the film, I can't say what I think about it. However Scorsese, for example, becomes very complicated I think in this way - where something very violent or brutal is on the screen and he shoots it in a very elegant manner so that you have this tension between the visuals and the material. But you seem to be aligning a kind of correspondence between the subject matter and the look of the film. I'm just curious why you make a big point of that, in *The Public Eye* piece.

**Todd:** In the case of *The Public Eye*, I just very strongly felt that the proper approach to that kind of material,

would have been a sort of Sam Fuller tabloid approach. Very much like what Michael Chapman says about the shooting style of *Raging Bull*, that he based it a lot on Weegee. And since the character in *The Public Eye* is essentially Weegee, I thought that that kind of 30's, you know 'flashbulb' approach, would have been really appropriate. Instead, it's shot in a very cool, beautiful style. I thought it lessened the energy and the excitement of the film. It looked too much like a lot of other films. It looked like the Coen brothers films, it looked like any film shot in a studio manner with period settings. So that was my point in *The Public Eye*, and certainly, I'm very responsive to - let's say, casting against type, when it comes to the look of a film and going against genre conventions. So, I can certainly see when a director is trying to do that. But there are instances where I think it's simply inappropriate - you have to make distinctions between an inappropriate style and a intelligently countered style.

**Robin:** *Days of Heaven*.

**Todd:** Yeah.

**Robin:** It would be the supreme instance I think.

**Todd:** Right. Yeah, I agree.

**Richard:** It's a very interesting counter-point going on there - the lushness of the visuals.

**Todd:** You know, when Altman, in the early 70's was breaking genre conventions, one film that didn't make it into our film, which I find still visually one of the most stimulating is *The Long Goodbye*. Simply because the visual style in that film, is a visual correlative for life in Los Angeles. You never quite know where you are in relation to anything else. The perspective in your position is constantly changing. The camera is constantly on the move. It's brilliant. Whether they thought it through that far intellectually, I don't really know. But Vilmos when we interviewed him just said, 'Oh yeah, Altman just said, I want the camera to never stop moving. And that's up to you.' So, that's a director giving a cinematographer a long leash, to do what he thinks is best under the circumstances, under a general set of guidelines. Whereas, other directors will say exactly what they want. And if you want to cite a lot of the British directors from David Lean on up to Ridley Scott, and Boorman - they are very specific about what they want, and the cinematographer has very little input except the precise lighting of the shot. And I think that's more exciting for a cinematographer, if you can get that kind of leeway, it's great.

**Florence:** Who do you think of as your audience?

**Arnie:** Well, based on last night's reception, I feel, give the general audience a chance to see something like this. You hear the word documentary and you get a precon-



ceived idea, and I think this film lifts that curse of the documentary, by being humorous, by not having a narrator.

**Stuart:** I think also that it's a unique time in terms of this kind of film. *That's Entertainment* and others which came out earlier - like twenty years ago - before video cassettes were available. And also in the past ten years, people have been re-educated to filmmaking in a way that they hadn't before.

**Arnie:** And it intrigues a lot of people because they don't know about these films, because they don't get to see them at revival houses anymore, nobody tells them what to rent at the video store. We're presenting these excerpts out of context and for visual purposes, and in a way it makes it a little more digestible to the person who's not accustomed to seeing these films.

**Richard:** I think this film is very good in that sense, because it's not academic. And yet, it's not superficial or glossy, like *That's Entertainment*. There's a nice balance struck between entertainment and learning. I think that's part of what the audience was responding to last night, because they did feel they were being treated seriously, yet given a good time. It makes you want to go and see one of these movies again.... I was interested in the comments about *Do the Right Thing*, as being a very finely controlled film in terms of colour and lighting. Perhaps there should be more of that in your film. Because you kind of become lulled into the idea that many contemporary cinematographers are shooting off the cuff and it's all kind of spontaneous. But then you realize that some of these people are just as controlled as the studio cinematographers were.

**Todd:** Well, I think there are two strains of major influences in the latest cinematography. One is obviously the hand-held street style, because that's what's easy to do - you take a video camera and run down the street and that's what you get. I think the other style, and both of these styles are in rock videos, the other style is very, very stylized camera work with you know, lots of different coloured lights, gels and weird angles, and what you might say is a diminution in a way of the highly stylized studio look, because they are working within a studio and they are creating every effect with lighting and with colours. A lot of these people are looking back at old films, the old musicals or expressionist films or whatever, and they're trying to re-create these things in very simplistic ways. But I think still you've got that divergence, and what happens is that these people eventually work their way into mainstream cinema and all these things sort of get refined. And what's ironic, is that a lot of the people, take Vilmos Zsigmond and Laszlo Kovacs as examples. They came up working out of documentaries in Hungary, I mean that's what they escaped, and then they came over and they did commercials, industrials, and exploitation films, and from a street exploitation style, if you want to call it that, or a motorcycle exploitation style, within ten years they were

doing highly stylized studio work. Laszlo Kovacs went up to do, you know, *New York, New York*, for instance. I mean, it's a big jump from *Easy Rider* to *New York, New York*, and he did that within a matter of six or seven years. And Vilmos Zsigmond the same thing, from exploitation films up to the kind of work he did on *Heaven's Gate*, for instance. So, that is what I mean by the kind of refinement of the styles that they will push towards once they come out of this. But I think the street style, comes out of video, rock video in particular, and documentaries - because a lot of people are doing that - and yet, there's this attraction towards the highly stylized fashion/hommage/musical/German Expressionism - you know look at the Madonna videos and stuff, I mean they're all hybrids of old studio styles. So, I think you've got those twin, those two tracks that are influential now.

**Florence:** What was your budget for this film?

**Stuart:** Outside of technology, the NHK pegs it close to being one million for the project which includes post-production.

**Florence:** Does that include your salaries?

**Stuart:** I wish. That includes costing out the equipment and the post-production and everything which was given, not in dollars but time. Your talking three or four hundred thousand dollars in stuff.

**Todd:** That's more or less the real sort of cost. But the thing is they have this big truck that has to go around. I kind of compare it, maybe unfairly, to the early days of sound. Because you have this enormous, high definition truck which has to go with you everywhere. We went to Ernest Dickerson's apartment in Brooklyn, for instance, and the truck has to sit outside and cables had to run up to the second floor and then the technicians are all in this truck wheeling these dials and electronic graphs and things and the levels have to be just right. And they really do like to tell you how things are supposed to be. You know, visually and what the image should look like and so on - it's like early sound, where you sort of have to push on your own, to go beyond what the technicians say you can do.

**Arnie:** And they pay no attention to the sound.

**Richard:** Who was the producer of this film? To whom were you accountable for budgets and time schedules and all that?

**Arnie:** Basically the American Film Institute held the purse strings. And so much of the stuff was donated. I mean apart from NHK's facilities - and I did the on-line in Tokyo for the high definition version. In Los Angeles, the optical houses and the labs are donating a lot of their time and their effort.

**Stuart:** The clip clearance - that's up and around a million dollars.

**Florence:** That's what I was wondering. Do you pay for that?

**Arnie:** Only the lab work.

**Florence:** That's amazing.

**Todd:** But the cost of doing such a documentary is really prohibitive now - if you don't have a special arrangement. I mean, AFI has an arrangement under which we are able to get these clips. The recent MGM documentary could only be done, because it was done in-house by Turner which owns all those films. I wrote a film on Preston Sturges a couple of years ago and the cost of clips when we went to Universal to get the Paramount films which they own now, and Fox, was also astronomical. And basically, they don't want to be bothered, and that's why they've jacked the prices up so high. They have no real interest in these kinds of films. Even though, from our point of view, as filmmakers, it helps promote their films. If you make a film about Preston Sturges, people want to go see their films.

**Stuart:** A lot of the companies are actually making it harder. MCA/Universal (Todd: Columbia) has made a decision not to give out clips to anything that doesn't come up on their label, that doesn't get released by them.

**Todd:** Goldwyn - Sam Goldwyn won't let you use anything. He won't even talk to you. Toland worked for him a lot, but fortunately there were enough non-Goldwyn films. But if you're stuck - say you're doing William Wyler or something, forget it - you're not going to be able to get those clips. They just don't want to hear about it.

*Editor's Note:*

*Visions of Light* is now available on video and laserdisc.

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# The Politics of **Modernity** in Latin America: Memory, Nostalgia and Desire in *Barroco*

by Zuzana M. Pick

Recent events in Mexico indicate that considerations about modernity are still valid, especially for Latin America. The Chiapas revolt represents, in my view, a reminder of an unresolved contest between tradition and modernity. The self-image of Mexico as a modern nation—fashioned by the Revolutionary Institutional Party, revamped by a new class of technocrats and sold to Mexicans, and the world, through a multi-million dollar public relations campaign—is being disputed. The country is once again trapped in, what Mexican sociologist and cultural critic Néstor García Canclini has described, the “incertitude about the meaning and value of modernity.” In the desire to be thoroughly modern, Mexico has become a stage of an intense drama. Hegemonic ideas of nation clash with the internal diversity of the country pitching the indigenous people against the state. In an extraordinary act of defiance, the revindication of the landless peasants of Chiapas represent one—among many—forms of resistance by marginalized groups in Latin America against transnational agendas of economic globalization.

*Barroco* (Baroque Concert), directed by the Mexican filmmaker Paul Leduc in 1989, is inspired by a novella by the Cuban musicologist, writer and diplomat Alejo Carpentier entitled *Baroque Concert* and published in 1976. This multi-faceted and

innovative film can be examined from the perspective of the 500 years, and the debates around the Columbian enterprise in the Americas. It could be seen as part of a revisionist historical tendency in Latin American cinema that includes films such as *How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman* (Nelson Pereira dos Santos, Brazil 1971), *The Holy Office* (Arturo Ripstein, Mexico 1977), *Tupac Amaru* (Federico García (Peru/Cuba 1984), *Nuevo Mundo* (Gabriel Retes, Mexico 1987, released in 1990), *Cabeza de Vaca* (Mexico, 1991), *Jerico* (Luis Alberto Lamata, Venezuela 1991), and *La Cruz del Sur* (Patricio Guzmán, Chile/Spain 1992). After all, *Barroco* was co-produced by Spanish television and the Quincentennial Project. Instead, I will associate the modernist strategies of this film to a politics of modernity. To the extent that *Barroco* re-imagines the sources and boundaries of Latin American representation, this archaeological project also fits into the contemporary dynamics of cultural memory.

## The Politics of Modernity

The incertitude about the meaning and the value of modernity derives not only from what separates nations, ethnicities and classes, but from the socio-cultural crossings in which the traditional and the modern intersect.

Néstor García Canclini.<sup>1</sup>

To begin with, it may be useful to clarify what I mean by modernity, especially because of the peculiar character that modernity has taken in the historical and geographical area that we have chosen to call Latin America. When Latin American cultural critics use the term modernity, they do not automatically associate social modernization and cultural modernism. For them, the term modernity acknowledges the contradictory effects of modernization, progress and development, and the existence of, what García Canclini has termed, a 'multi-temporal heterogeneity.'

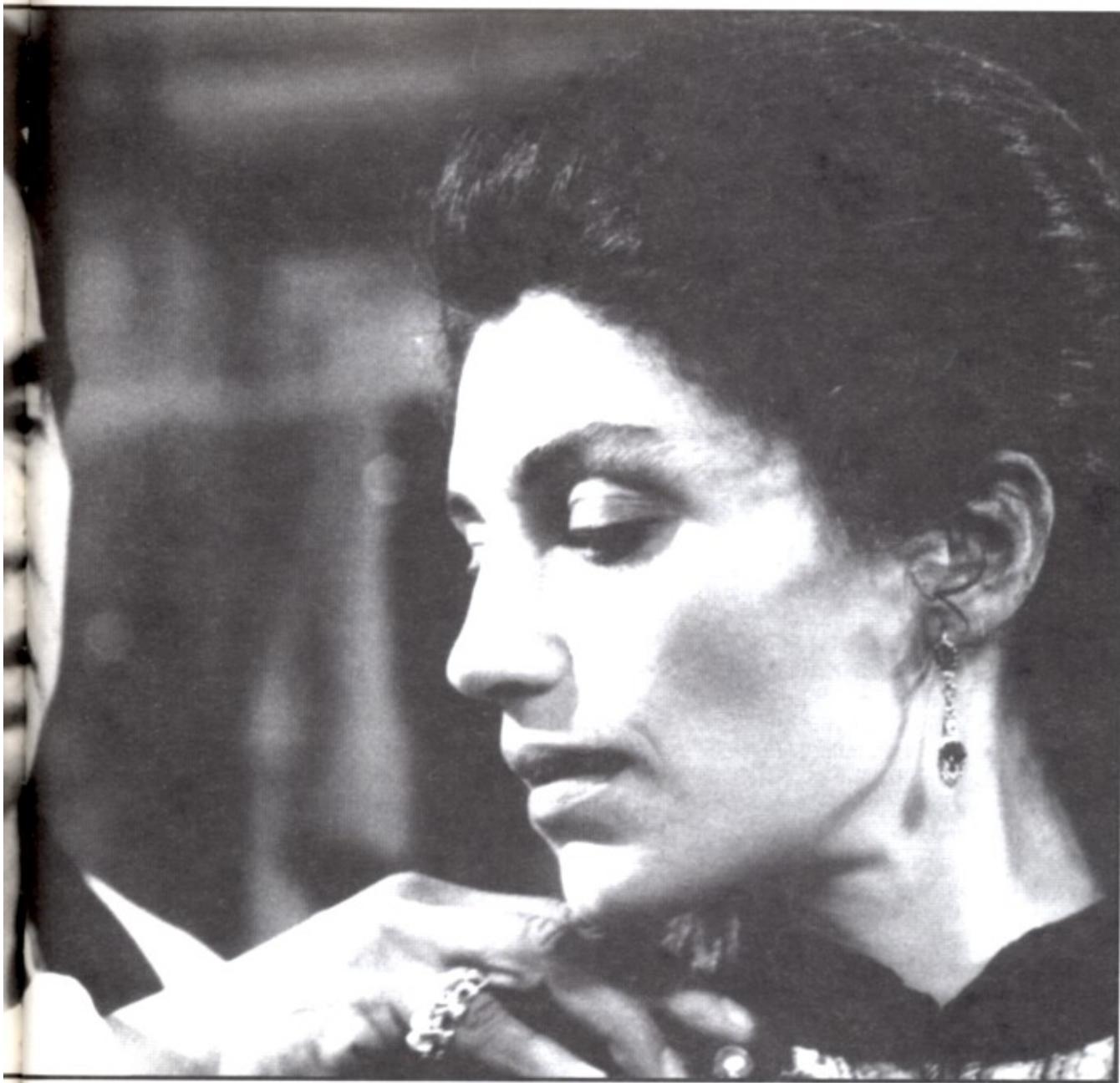
"This heterogeneity, resulting from the coexistence of cultural formations that originated in different eras, favours the types of cross-fertilization and hybridization that show up in Latin American...practices with greater intensity than in the metropolis."<sup>2</sup>

This multi-temporal heterogeneity recognizes, for instance, the coexistence of traditional and avant-garde, popular and high art, local and the foreign, artisanal and industrial practices not only in terms of production, but also of circulation and consumption. Hence, the term modernity represents neither a break from the past nor a new way of describing and categorizing the present; instead it re-articulates the process whereby historical and cultural formations mediate and condition contemporaneity.

One of the peculiarities of Latin American modernity lies in the emphasis placed on cultural memory. For the Colombian sociologist Jesús Martín-Barbero, "cultural memory has nothing to do with nostalgia: its function in the community is not to talk about the past but to give continuity to the ongoing construction of collective identity."<sup>3</sup> Cultural memory exceeds a cumulative user-value function; it is processual and productive, it filters, charges and empowers shaping a dialectic of permanence and change, resistance and exchange.

Another peculiarity of Latin American modernity resides in the significance of history. From the genocide of indigenous populations, the enslavement and forced relocation of African populations, and the massive





<sup>1</sup>Néstor García Canclini, *Culturas hibridas: Estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad*. Mexico: Editorial Grijalbo, 1990, p.14. (Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Spanish are mine.)

<sup>2</sup>Néstor García Canclini, "Studies of Communication and Consumption: Interdisciplinary Work in Neoconservative Times," translated by Cyndi Meillon, *BorderLines* no. 27, 1993, p.10.

<sup>3</sup>Jesús Martín Barbero, *Communication, Culture and Hegemony. From the Media to Mediations*, translated by Elizabeth Fox and Robert White, London: SAGE Publications, 1993, p.184.

immigrations of Europeans initiated in 1492 to the present day, Latin America has been profoundly affected by the colonial and post-colonial experience. Hence, the process of modernity is not seen as having stripped the past of its "functional continuity." But, as the Argentine cultural critic Beatriz Sarlo writes, history has been "re-functionalized", it has been "given particular forms in the reading and imaginary recuperation of a culture...."<sup>4</sup> The avant-garde movement that emerged in Cuba hardly two decades after independence, for instance, played a decisive role in the re-assessment of Black history. Afro-Cubanism in the 1920s represented a radical break. It served as a point of origin for modern history, and became a different way of imagining how cultural practices had been shaped by the heritage of slavery and rebellion.

This re-functionalization of history can also be found, as I have argued in the book *The New Latin American Cinema: A Continental Project*, in the idea of Latin America: a modernist construct that refers to the political and cultural specificity of the geographic area that extends from the Rio Grande to Tierra del Fuego. Although the term 'Latin America' originated in the context of French foreign policy in the 1850s to designate the territory colonized by Spain and Portugal (including the French and English-speaking Caribbean), Latin Americans adopted the term as part of a continental political argument and used it to promote solidarity and mutual support against neo-colonial exploitation.

From a cultural perspective, this supra-national idea may be seen as somewhat problematic because it brings together diverse populations with differing cultural histories and traditions. Yet, as a *unity within diversity*, this idea has served, at the outset and in the early part of this century, to question the positivist utopias of progress put forward by the nation-states that emerged in the wake of the civil wars of the post-independence period. Later, and leading to the present, this idea has served to problematize homogeneous notions of nationality and identity.

This idea is also profoundly linked to modernity as a sovereign project of autonomy and self-determination. The idea of Latin America, and the meanings associated with it, is more than simply a myth or an utopia. It is a discursive formation whereby the history and the imagination of a continent can be reclaimed. Not always as a commanding paradigm, but often as an assertive impulse, this idea of Latin America has fuelled some of the richest and most exciting artistic practices emerging from the region.

One example of the powerful effect of this idea can be found in *Barroco*, but more about this film later. Another example are the paintings of the Uruguayan artist José Gamarra. As art historians Oriana Baddeley and Valeria Fraser point out, his work "combines an ideal image of the tropical Latin American landscape with an acute awareness of the irony of the parallel history of conquest, colonization and exploitation."<sup>5</sup> Set within the luxurious jungle vegetation are tiny figures of people and objects, sometimes narrating an incident like the beheading of a nun in "From the Series of Masked Aggressions" (painted in 1983), which refers to the rape and murder of American nuns by the Salvadorean army in 1980. In this painting, the tropical forest is invoked simultaneously as a mythical and actual place, the site upon which Europe imagined the Americas and the place where Latin America's violent history is still being played out.

Latin American cultural practices have assumed history and envisioned the future in a layering of regional specificities, and through narrative negotiations of nation, class, race (of which the exclusion of native American and African populations cannot be overlooked) and gender. In this process, the search for means of representing national and continental realities, collective and individual identities, is the keyword that best characterizes the creative and political projects that have emerged in Latin America. Based on a sense of shared destiny and common identity, Latin Americans have endowed themselves with a "grand historical narrative" that, as the literary critic Gerald Martin writes, "is the continent's dominant self-interpretation."<sup>6</sup> This continental identity has permitted Latin Americans to move beyond the strict boundaries of the national, and produce a sense of shared community that recognizes itself within interregional (and intraregional) variations, countering state-defined allegiances and differences.

Furthermore, in view of the major role played by the mass-media in the modernizing agendas of nation-states and the pressures of the global marketplace, modernity is understood as a still-open process, unfinished and yet-to-be constructed, but still uncertain and even unpredictable. Motivated by criticism, free expression and tolerance, the project of modernity (political, social and cultural) is viewed by Mexican critic Carlos Monsiváis as a liberating agency.<sup>7</sup> This aspect is crucial because "to radicalize the project of modernity," in García Canclini's words, "is to intensify and renew the incertitude, to

create new possibilities so that modernity can be always something else and something more."<sup>8</sup>

In many ways, *Barroco* can be seen as a symptom of the *incertitude* of Latin American modernity. With its imaginatively meta-historical treatment and transgressive construction of desire, *Barroco* shares many characteristics of Latin America's "master (modernist) narrative." It celebrates syncretism, the cultural cross-fertilization of the Old World and the New World, and juxtaposes high culture and popular art, indigenous, Afro-Caribbean and European music and dance. Yet, the film seeks to connect itself in the multi-temporal realities of contemporary Latin American experience, and in particular with the cross-cultural features of Caribbean popular music.

## History and Imagination

The simultaneous crisis of modernity and traditions, of its historical alliance, ushers a postmodern problematic (not a stage) in the sense that the modern explodes and blends with what is not, it is affirmed and discussed concurrently.... Artists practice with advanced technologies and, at the same time, look back in search of a historical density or a stimulus to imagine.

Néstor García Canclini<sup>9</sup>

As mentioned earlier, *Barroco* is inspired by the Carpentier novella but is not a literary adaptation. The novella is only a source that operates alongside a diverse range of representations and practices, to inform this multi-layered film. Yet, this allusion to Carpentier's work indicates the appropriation of a high modernist tradition, and a canonized literary movement, usually linked to the term *magical realism*. These appropriations validate the film's avant-garde project, and certainly influenced co-production arrangements, as well as the circulation of *Barroco* as an "art film."<sup>10</sup> In the last decade, economic difficulties have constrained Latin American filmmakers to search for international financing, often opting for literary adaptations to guarantee monetary return, distribution and marketability.<sup>11</sup> The risks are great because, as film critic B. Ruby

Rich has pointed out, "the very real heterogeneity that has always made up 'Latin America' itself a near-fictional construct [could] vanish under the homogeneity of brand-name magical realism flying a multinational banner."<sup>12</sup>

The plot of *Barroco* centers around a prosperous man (Roberto Sosa) who, with his black servant (Ernesto Gómez Cruz), travels from Mexico to Cuba, and then to Spain and Italy. By the end of the film, five centuries of history and music have unravelled before his (and our) eyes. Through spatial and temporal shifts, the film recharts some of the narratives through which Latin American, Caribbean and Spanish cultural identities have been constituted. Thus reference is made to the conquest in the Mexican sequences, to slavery and rebellion in the Cuban sequences, and to the Reconquista and the Civil War in the Spanish sequences. All these incidents are staged as interrelated, yet autonomous, narrative and musical tableaux. The characters of the film remain nameless but their identities are explicitly defined by race, class and gender, and their relationships patterned according to historical and literary typologies. These typological affiliations are further enhanced by having actors play similar roles in different historical periods as is the case with the Spanish actors Angela Molina and Francisco Rabal.

But these typologies are undermined in the case of the two main characters. The black servant who is presented as a concierge, later becomes an accomplice and a friend to his master. At the end of the

<sup>4</sup> Beatriz Sarlo, "Modernity and Cultural Mixture. The Case of Buenos Aires," in John King, Ana M. López, and Manuel Alvarado, eds., *Mediating Two Worlds. Cinematic Encounters in the Americas*, London: BFI Publishing, 1993, pp. 166-167.

<sup>5</sup> Oriana Baddeley and Valerie Fraser, *Drawing the Line: Art and Cultural Identity in Latin America*, London: Verso 1989, p. 24.

<sup>6</sup> Gerald Martin, *Journeys Through the Labyrinth*, London: Verso, 1989, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> Carlos Monsiváis, "Cultura, tradición y modernidad," *La Jornada*, February 21, 1992.

<sup>8</sup> García Canclini (1990), p. 333.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 331.

<sup>10</sup> *Barroco* is available in North America through the Museum of Modern Art in New York only in a Spanish-language print that, in my view, limits its circulation and perpetuates the tendency of seeing Latin American popular music as an ethnographic curiosity or as a form of entertainment.

<sup>11</sup> A recent instance of this phenomenon is the adaptation of Alejo Carpentier's *Exploración in a Cathedral* by the Cuban filmmaker Humberto Solás.

<sup>12</sup> B. Ruby Rich, "An/Other View of New Latin American Cinema," *Iris* no. 13 (Summer 1991), p. 24.

film, the traditional master-servant relationship has been recast: the servant has become an equal, and leaves the master behind in Europe. He returns by airplane to Cuba. The master is a Spaniard who lives in Mexico. Although he looks like a *mestizo*, he can be identified—like the affluent man in Carpentier's novella—as an *Indiano*. The *Indiano* is a traditional character in colonial narratives who must decide between Spain and America. He has appropriated an exotic culture, but remains a foreigner in the eyes of Europe. Racially connected to the Spanish-American *criollo*, the identity of the *Indiano* in *Barroco* is marked by becoming. Not yet American but no longer European, he occupies an indeterminate subaltern space, exiled from representation. This indefinite and fragmentary identity is visually rendered in the film.

*Barroco* begins, as the *Indiano* readies himself to leave. It is dawn and the sun rises over a Mexican hacienda. He meditates, smokes and drinks in a room-full of opulent objects. There are fruits, jewels, books and musical instruments. An Aztec head-dress made out of feathers and a score of "Moctezuma: Storia per Musica" occupy a prominent place. These objects are set in the foreground of the frame, and arranged in a still-life manner. Is it a booty, a treasure or a collection? Is the *Indiano* a plunderer, a pirate or an amateur of fine art? This display conjures the picturesque exoticism of colonialism; it is a lavish spectacle of primitivism and alterity. At the same time, this exhibit alludes to the multifarious iconographic tradition upon which artists in the Americas have drawn for inspiration recalling the rich history of Latin American visual arts.

Always returning to the set of the opening sequences, the plot's circularity establishes the journey as a meta-historical narrative. The lavish and baroque mise-en-scène, with its highly-coded imagery, makes apparent the capriciousness of this journey and destabilizes the epic dimensions of historical representation. Actual and legendary episodes of American (and Spanish) history are re-envisioned through the *Indiano*'s gaze and mediated by the camera's point of view. As the *Indiano* observes the events, and sees himself acting in them as a young man (played by Alfredo Pedro), he becomes the passive or performing agent of different episodes of the film. The proliferation of mirrors and windows (that function as reflective surfaces and visual barriers) draws attention to the regulating function of the gaze. Although this gaze belongs to the *Indiano*, the spectator becomes an accomplice to its narcissistic

voyeurism. Moreover, and through the gaze, *Barroco* stresses the shifting power (and burden) of representation, while its self-reflexive modernist mode emphasizes allegory.

Anchored in the unrelenting, and sometimes complex, movement of the camera, the gaze re-enacts a historical scenario of appropriation and exclusion whereby the identity of the Americas, invented by Europe, is constantly re-written. This economy of nostalgia and desire set up by the *Indiano*'s gaze activates a form of spectatorship that engage us as imaginary and historical agents of representation. As in Leduc's previous film (*Frida: Naturaleza viva*, 1982), camera movement and staging signal that film is a performative and affective medium.

In this context, *Barroco* represents a further step in a renewed avant-garde project that abandons old dichotomies—old and new, foreign and national—for a different way of articulating the place of aesthetic practice in everyday life. Yet, its experimental mode distinguishes this film from most of the production associated to the New Latin American Cinema. It seeks to make new connections between high art and popular culture, imaging a new space for historical representation while drawing on contextually-specific affiliations between music, performance and cultural memory. A staunchly independent producer/director, in a country where few filmmakers can afford working outside of established film policies and without financial support from mainstream agencies, Leduc has certainly taken a risk with this eclectic film. Straying away from generic formulations, and exploring a crossover between literature, film and music, *Barroco* re-articulates alternative traditions within modernity. It endorses a politics of "reconversion", which in García Canclini's terms, recognizes that "through cultural exchange, we [Latin Americans] are making the most of what we have and are trying to say something more or different."<sup>13</sup>

## The Aesthetics of Performance

But now they all exploded behind Louis Armstrong's trumpet in a glorious jamming of "I Can't Give You Anything But Love, Baby" with dazzling variations—a new baroque concerto into which, dropping through the

skylight by marvelous fortuity, there blended the hours rung out by the Moors of the Orologio Tower.

Alejo Carpentier, *Baroque Concert*.<sup>14</sup>

While retaining most of the basic plot of its source, Paul Leduc's film deviates from the standard approach to literary works. *Barroco* is a film without dialogue, and is structured into distinct sections named after the classical movements in music composition. The film depends on choreography for narrative coherence, on ellipsis and expression rather than classical continuity editing and character motivation. Through this experimental mode, the story of *Barroco* unfolds in musical tableaux, somewhat like the big numbers in a musical show. Yet, these tableaux have a distinct narrative function. Rather than interrupting or fracturing narrative progression, these musical sequences organize the protagonists' spatial and temporal journey. The highly coded choreography of these tableaux connects the characters and settings, in the affective manner of music videos. I will return to this idea later.

This aesthetic treatment opens cinematic representation to various expressive registers (music, dance, performance, carnival and circus) and a variety of sources (classical, popular, European, Afro-Caribbean). In doing so, *Barroco* operates freely across a variety of performative and representational practices. This multi-textuality is heightened by the film's elaborate mise-en-scène and, as pointed out earlier, by iconographic citations. Long tracking shots along elegant sets and natural locations expose unexpected points of view, and produce a spectacular, exotic-looking theatricality. The settings—Maya ruins (Yucatán), Moorish alcazars (Córdoba), plazas, churches, palaces and discotheques (Havana, Mexico, Venice, Madrid)—and the temporal and spatial displacements, obsessively enacted through the *Indiano*'s voyeuristic gaze, serve to re-visualize history.

The imaginary journey of the *Indiano* is primarily a celebration of popular music, a trip across a soundscape where rhythms are combined, appropriated and fused into new hybrid forms. Traditional and contemporary renditions of songs and dances highlight the syncretic features of Afro-American expressions. This is particularly obvious in a tableau, set in an elegant colonial salon, which re-stages the historical transmutations and the hybrid genealogy of the *son*, the backbone of modern Cuban dance music.

Through musical substitutions, a classical rendi-

tion of Rossini's "Barber of Seville" is melodically enriched by a *rumba* "El barbero de Sevilla loco se volvió" and a *guaguancó* "Barbero Caravali" interpreted respectively by the Orchestra Revé and Enrique Boyne and his group of drum players. The *batá* drums (reconstructed in the slave quarters of the Spanish Caribbean), the Afro-Caribbean percussion instruments (cowbells, *maracas*, *güiros*, *quijadas*) sensitize the auratic texture of the European instruments. This tableau breaks down the social barriers between white and black music establishing the religious roots of Afro-Cuban dancing styles. It brings together ritual and secular celebrations: *santería* (a Yoruba-derived religion still widely practiced by Cubans of African heritage) and carnival. It also highlights the cross-cultural exchanges through which modern Afro-Cuban dance music has evolved. The French *cotillon* is carnivalized into a *tumba francesa* (brought to Cuba by Haitian slaves and runaways), the *conga* mutates into a *danzón* and a *guaracha*, its modern equivalent.

The choreographies, through which the popular culture of the Americas is represented, emphasize the body. Male and female, Indian, European and African, the performing body is the site upon which otherness and syncretism are written. The costumes, wigs, masks and body painting draw upon traditions of carnival where masquerade refers both to the dress and the identities represented by the dress. In this process, the cross- and trans-cultural identities of the Americas are fetishized, their desire imagined but simultaneously denied. There is something *marvelous* in this representation inasmuch as it stages the desire to abolish the distance between the self and the other. Here I am using the term *marvelous* to describe—as in Alejo Carpentier's prologue to the *Kingdom of this World* (1946)—that special form of American consciousness that assumes history as an experience of utopia.

Yet, *Barroco* problematizes the alterity of the marvelous, and the moment in which the Old World writes on the body of the New World its own history, during the sequences in Venice and through the staging of Vivaldi's opera *Montezuma*, a rarely per-

<sup>13</sup> Néstor García Canclini, "Cultural Reconversion," translated by Holly Staver, in George Yúdice, Jean Franco, Juan Flores, eds. *On Edge. The Crisis of Contemporary Latin American Culture*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1992, p. 31.

<sup>14</sup> Alejo Carpentier, *Concierto Barroco*, translated by Asa Zatz. Tulsa; Oklahoma: Council Oak Books/Hecate with the University of Tulsa, 1974, p. 131.

formed "fantasy" which is also a key episode in the novella marking the *Indiano*'s rejection of the Eurocentric vision of the Americas. This is the moment when the *Indiano* realizes that he is an American, not a European, and that the cultural wealth and tragic history of the Americas has been appropriated (like the spoils of war) by an enlightened Europe. As staged in the film, the opera about the conquest of Mexico blends baroque elements and folk art in a burlesque display of exoticism. The cross-dressed performers, the papier-mâché ornaments and the coloured-smoke trivialize that decisive moment of origin, and showdown between the conqueror and the conquered is de-legitimized.

## Baroque Utopias and Transculturation

What was our place in the world? To whom did we owe allegiance? Our European fathers? Our Quechua, Maya, Aztec or Chibcha mothers? To whom should we pray, the ancient gods or the new ones? What language would we speak, the language of the conquered or that of the conquerors? The baroque of the New World addressed all these questions. [...] The baroque was a shifting art, akin to a mirror in which we see our constantly changing identity.

Carlos Fuentes.

At first view, the aesthetics of *Barroco* stream from practices which propose to explore a collective psyche of Latin America. Multi-ethnic or *mestizo*, syncretic and polyrhythmic, this psyche is saturated by dialogical and asymmetrical messages. This film presumes the possibility of representing, as suggested by Carlos Fuentes, the identity of Americas as a "buried mirror", a reflective site, carnivalized and apocalyptic.<sup>15</sup> In a sense, the style of this baroque, exotic and spectacular (and dare I say, post-modern) film presumes the still unresolved puzzle haunting Latin American cultural practices.

While informed by the differing means by which historical and cultural identities have been constructed, *Barroco* also draws upon the concept of transculturation. Originally coined by the Cuban anthropologist, and promoter of Afro-Cubanism, Fernando Ortiz in the 1930s, and later used by the

Uruguayan critic Angel Rama in the 1970s, this term describes the literary and cultural specificity of Latin American practices. It is used to explain the productive, yet destructive and unequal, exchanges between New World and Old World cultures, high art and popular art which are the Latin American responses to modernity and postmodernity.

In *Barroco* this cross-fertilization, or *mestizaje*, is predominantly musical. By bringing together musical expressions and dance styles, it celebrates the African roots of the Spanish Caribbean imagining a community that can claim citizenship through borrowing and exchange. In this manner, the film represents the affective sources of cultural identity and, through the mise-en-scène, localizes them simultaneously in the landscapes and bodies of actors, dancers and singers. Yet, through the symbolic and erotic charge of the mise-en-scène, this materiality shifts between metaphor and metonymy, between the idea of Latin America, as a discourse, and across the expressive and affective materiality of vernacular rhythms, choreography and performance.

Although the film has been described by John King as a rewriting of opera, I prefer to associate its strategies to the music video.<sup>16</sup> Music video is circulated in Latin America by transnational recording companies and primarily distributed by television cable companies. While most locally-produced music videos include *rock latino* and pop ballads, other forms of music have had limited exposure because independent recording companies cannot afford expensive promotion campaigns. The main venues for the distribution and circulation of dancing music, rap and folk are still music programmes on television, radio, live performance (concerts, bars, dancing halls or street events), cassette recordings, and music sheets.<sup>17</sup> With the globalization of cultural industries, Latin American popular music no longer inhabits a traditional space, and its audiences are expanding in spite of privatization and market pressures. As García Canclini writes in *Culturas híbridas*:

"Instead of the death of traditional cultural forms, we now discover that tradition is in transition and articulated to modern processes. Reconversion prolongs their existence. ...to reconvert cultural capital means to transfer symbolic patrimony from one site to another in order to conserve it, increase its yield and better the position of those who practice it."

What strikes me is that the meta-historical (and literary) attributes of *Barroco* are de-centered, the hierarchy between high and popular art reformulated through the function and meaning of musical practices. Concurrently, the musical tableaux place music within a historical framework providing a new iconographic context through which the polysemic nature of musical and dance performances can be visualized. The video clip strategies of this film provide an alternative—intertextual and meta-historical—space for interpretation where high, popular and mass-mediated cultures can coexist and nourish each other. The participation of performers like Silvio Rodríguez is indicative of this new interpretative space.<sup>18</sup>

In addition, the film establishes a new visual-auratic space for dance performances. Aztec or Arab folklore (the Grupo Xochipiltzahuatl, Mexico, and Grupo Andalusí, Tanger), and African cult music (Grupo Cutumba, Cuba) are concurrently a citation and a tribute to the periods in which these forms flourished. In *Barroco*, dance is carnivalized. With its references to pantomime, circus and street theater, dance becomes a form collective expression and communal bonding where the body is liberated and eroticized, social hierarchies are broken down. Most interesting is the performance of the Tropicana dancers whose 1950's cabaret act, complete with kitschy costumes and camp decorations, still attracts tourists in Havana. Towards the end of the film most of the characters (with the exception of the *Indiano*) come together at the Tropicana. And as in a video clip, the actors are released from the historically-coded identities they assumed in the film, and placed in the context of a Vegas-style show that most people only know through television or advertising. The image of the Tropicana dancers (like those of sunsets over white sand beaches) represents an exotic and appropriable commodity. Yet, the Tropicana is also a place where stories can be retold through music, and where people from the Spanish Caribbean can re-imagine themselves as participating agents of a communal narrative.

## Cultural Memory and Contemporaneity

A consciousness of body movement and of its endless rhythmic possibilities has been discovered by Colombian youth through dance. In their walking on the streets where risk and chances of dangerous surprises are always present, popular youth have reinforced this consciousness of the body. [...] Their bodies express the rhythmic sensuality acquired with the dance but with the co-ordinated, measured and watchful movement learned on the streets. In the daily life in the street, in the *galladas* most routinized activities, music is a means to define identity and to remember.

Pilar Riaño.

*Barroco* appropriates the video clip as an aesthetic link with the cultural plurality of the mass-mediated social experiences, habits and tastes of urban Latin American youth. Seen from this perspective, *Barroco* constructs a historical space where "new fusions"—between rock-and-roll, Afro-Cuban rhythms, folk and *nueva canción*—can be re-enacted, and where new modes of expression are aligned to the politics of modernity.

As suggested in the above quote, music is integral to the social experience of youth in the over-populated cities of Latin America. If popular youth has appropriated rock-and-roll, *salsa*, disco and *merengue*, it is also drawn to traditional rhythms. As

<sup>15</sup> Carlos Fuentes, *The Buried Mirror*, p. 196.

<sup>16</sup> John King, *Magical Reels. A History of Cinema in Latin America*, London: Verso, 1990, p. 164.

<sup>17</sup> These comments are tentative as I have not been able to research the circulation of music video in Latin America in an adequate way. While trade journals (*Billboard* and *Variety*) provide some information, I was not been able to locate more specific details about videos that feature styles of music that circulate at the fringes of the mainstream but which are being produced by independent filmmakers.

<sup>18</sup> Probably the best known composer and interpreter of Cuba's *Nueva Trova*, Silvio Rodríguez has attained over the years a star status all over Latin America. His music circulated clandestinely during the rule of General Augusto Pinochet in Chile (1973-1989) through bootleg cassettes and photocopied music sheets. Once Patricio Alwin was elected president, Rodríguez was invited to Santiago to perform at the National Stadium to a crowd of 50,000 people.

Pilar Riaño writes, "the new rhythms could not provide popular youth with the words needed to communicate their experiences and passions. This role was filled by musical genres, such as *Tango*, *Ranchera* (Mexican music), *Carilera* and bolero, that constitute the old musical rhythms."<sup>19</sup>

The "old" songs, memorized through repeated replay on radio, television, in bars and corner stores, establish a space for nostalgia amidst the unpredictable. Their lyrics express in old ways the new way of living on the streets of the *barrio*. Thus popular music is the site where stories are retold, and in Pilar Riaño's words, "music identifies their differences, and provides a ways of classifying their spaces."<sup>20</sup> Traditional music are thus re-invested with new values and functions inviting new pleasures.

This re-investment is evoked in the film by the importance assigned to a popular Cuban song entitled "El son de la loma." It is hummed by the black servant and performed alternatively by Elena Burke, Omara Portuondo, Cesár Portillo de la Luz and José Antonio Mendez in a colonial *bodega*; the Orchestra Revé at the Tropicana cabaret in Havana, and by the Trio Matamoros, who originally recorded it, over the closing credits. The main refrain consists of a speculative, unanswered, question: "¿De dónde son los cantantes?" (From where are the singers?) Its reiteration through the film acknowledges the various places where the *son* flourished, where it was altered and appropriated. Like the refrain, the film refuses to name origins and determine genealogies.

The music video aesthetic of *Barroco* is a marker of the affect of cultural memory, of the lived and empowering blending of history and contemporaneity. Moreover, the adoption of music video strategies entails an enunciative ambiguity, a decentering of authorial and spectatorial positions. The direct mode of address of music videos in which the performer is both a narrator and storyteller allows, as Andrew Goodwin suggests, "a conflation of the real/implied authorial voice."<sup>21</sup> But also, as suggested by this film, the iconographic value of the performers shifts as they become characters of a meta-historical narrative. Angela Molina, for instance, sings with a gypsy group in the Alhambra of Córdoba but also performs a Spanish-language punk song in a Madrid discotheque. Who is the real, and

who is the implied authorial voice? The barefoot performer playing a gypsy, or the black leather-clad singer acting out the role of a modern Spanish woman?

*Barroco*, though intertextually connected to a "master (modernist) narrative", displays and performs the contingency and *incertitude* of historical discourses, those that the Cuban-born literary critic Roberto González Echeverría calls "grounding genealogies."<sup>22</sup> The spectacular qualities of *Barroco* de-construct these "grounding genealogies", and fracture the rhetorics and specularity of this meta-historical discourse. It is in this sense that I see affinities between the film's aesthetic modernism and contemporary, mass-mediated, cultural practices. The self-conscious exhibitionism and commodification of the exotic provide another vision of *magic realism*, one that is a marketable fetish but also a powerful tool of self-representation. Thus the apparent cohesiveness of the exotic is contested by its materiality as a cinematic spectacle, as a performance from which minority, marginal and emergent voices can speak.

*A shorter version of this article was delivered as a lecture at the University of Albuquerque, New Mexico. I would like to thank Ira Jaffe, Head of Media Arts, and the organizers of the International Speakers Series.*

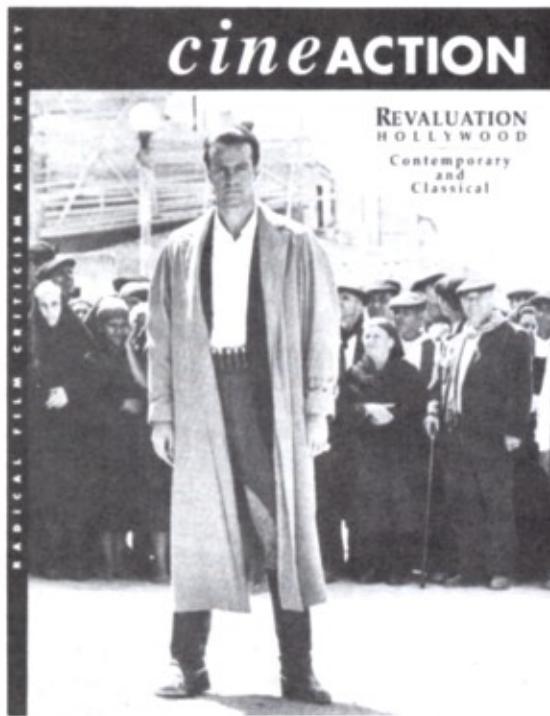
<sup>19</sup> Pilar Riano, "The *Galladas* of the *Barrios* of Bogotá: Actors in Space and Time," *BorderLines* no. 27, 1993, p.39.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 40.

<sup>21</sup> Andrew Goodwin, *Dancing in the Distraction Factory. Music Television and Popular Culture*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1992, p. 76.

<sup>22</sup> Roberto González Echeverría, *Alejo Carpentier. The Pilgrim at Home*, Austin: Texas University Press, 1977, p. 266.

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## FUTURE ISSUES [submissions welcome]

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To anyone who attempts to keep abreast of intellectual trends, there can surely be little doubt that for those academics whose area of reference extends little further than the study and lecture circuit, postmodernism is now the philosophical equivalent of the hula hoop, an outmoded discourse which can simply be consigned to the history books as our Great White Theorist pushes ever further into the semiological jungle in pursuit of the big game from which, as usual, s/he is rapidly retreating.

For those of us who not only consume popular culture, but actually believe that it has a role to play beyond, on the one hand, keeping the proletariat in a state of stupefaction and, on the other, providing material for the condescension of a self-declared elite, the damage done

by the theoretical tides of the 80s is readily apparent, and commentators who once claimed that an alliance between Marxism and postmodernism was not only viable but necessary must now feel like Nazi sympathizers confronted with the Holocaust. This is, of course, the theme of Hitchcock's *Rope*, and it is tempting to imagine a remake in which a Professor of Film with a commitment to deconstruction discovers that one of her/his most dedicated pupils has made *Last Action Hero*.

Needless to say, it would be the height of folly to claim that Theory managed the feat of separating a filmic tradition which, until the late 70s, has provided countless models of the radical use of conventional structures, from its complex roots without strong reinforcement from the wider culture: indeed the key text in terms of mainstream American cinema, *Star Wars*, with its knowing evocation of a generic past, predated postmodernism's *prise de pouvoir* by several years. Nevertheless, postmodern discourse helped give a totally spurious air of respectability to a general trend which even a reasonably alert five-year-old could have been expected to discern as conservative recuperation at its most banal.

I do not, of course, mean to suggest either that cultural products exist in a vacuum, or that it is

## Postmodern Times: POPULAR AMERICAN CINEMA and the Critical Climate

by  
**Brad Stevens**

"Once the idiom of the cinema has been invented, it simply took off on its own and left behind its original purpose and function—namely to define reality, to produce and reflect the external world in a set form. That idea of the cinema—the reason for which I would say it was 'invented'—is lost. So now this (film) language reads nothing but itself." (Wim Wenders, *The Logic of Images*).

"There is always a moment when art immobilizes the world, and the later it comes, the better. I call art of the right this fascination with immobility, which makes one describe outcomes without ever asking about, I won't say causes (art isn't deterministic), but functions." (Roland Barthes, 1959).

nothing more than a symptom of ideological contradiction: on the contrary, the complexly interlocking system of stars, genres and authors which, together with the background of an equally complex literary tradition, formed the classical Hollywood cinema, provided a tool for the critical interrogation of the social world, and it seems particularly perverse that so many supposedly left-wing writers (David Bordwell being a prime example) have felt obliged to expend so much time and energy attempting to expose this cinema as nothing more than an instrument for the dissemination of bourgeois ideology.

Clearly then, the key to understanding the way in which the contemporary Hollywood relates to that of the past is in the use made of reference to extra-textual material. We tend to imagine that this kind of reference originated in France with the *nouvelle vague* and was gradually absorbed into the American cinema by the film-school trained directors who came to prominence in the 70s, but this later trend can easily be seen as a development of one of the fundamental structuring principles of classical Hollywood, the very existence of stars and genres testifying to the importance placed by both artist and audience on the concept of variations on a theme. The series of borderline psychopaths played by James Stewart in the Anthony Mann westerns, for instance, gain much of their effect from being incarnated by an actor whose persona was that of the small-town boy and figure-head of democracy, and perhaps the most disturbing thing about the Mann protagonists is that this characteristic, far from being eliminated, is still provocatively present.

The nature of the reference here is obviously political, in the sense that reference to texts subserves a critique of the social processes by which those texts are determined. This point is of fundamental importance in a consideration of modern American cinema, for as Andrew Britton has demonstrated (in a brilliant article in Movie 31/32, to which I am



strongly indebted) this political reference was accompanied by a rather different kind, best exemplified by the Hope/Crosby 'Road' films, in which the constant opening outward of the text actually served to insulate it within the category of 'entertainment,' referring to 'reality' only to the extent necessary to demonstrate its total otherness.

Today, however, this strictly subservient tradition has attained a dominant position, with the result that what serious work there is has become increasingly marginalized. One might take, as a representative case, the opening of Spielberg's *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, in which the illustration of a mountain that accompanies the Paramount logo fades into a shot of Indiana Jones walking towards an identical mountain placed in exactly the same position on the screen. Clearly we have here been made aware of the distributor's logo in a way to which we are not used, and exegesis of distancing as in itself a radical act will doubtless applaud the foregrounding of those economic structures which determine the film text but are usually naturalized through the transparent and mimetic functions attributed to realism. Though in a sense this may be true, in another sense the foregrounding functions as a continuation of naturalization 'by other means,' for the economic structures of which we are here made aware are not

related to the actually existing social world which provides their context, and the only effect of our becoming aware of them is to insulate the text within (in Andrew Britton's words) "a hermetic entertainment 'world,'" in which the radical insights made possible by the simultaneous distancing and involvement which characterized the finest Hollywood films can be avoided through an insistence on the viewers' disengagement from the text.

One might contrast this with the superficially similar opening of Spike Lee's *School Daze*, in which the Columbia logo is accompanied by the sound of the creaking of a ship's timbers, a sound which the first image of the credit sequence identifies as belonging to a slave ship. Columbia's logo features a stylized representation of the Statue of Liberty, and the foregrounding here serves to throw the viewer outward into the world that determines the text, forcing us to question Columbia's motivation in placing the image of Lady Liberty at the head of their product. Most of the major Hollywood studios were formed by immigrants fleeing poverty and tyranny in Europe, and the myth of the immigrant whose arrival in the land of unlimited opportunity is heralded by the sight of the supreme exemplar of freedom is an important one for American ideology (Chaplin and Coppola have played particularly complex variations on it). What the juxtaposition of image and sound in Lee's film attempts to demonstrate is that the immigrant experience cannot be reduced to a simplistic trajectory from oppression to freedom, since there were a large number of unwilling immigrants who experienced this trajectory in reverse, and for whom the ideal of America as 'the golden door' waiting to receive 'the homeless tempest-tossed' could only have been perceived with the bitterest irony.

Proust, in his classic retreat from life, is the very symbol of the modern artist—the sick giant who locks himself up in a cork-lined cell to take his brains apart. He is the incarnation of that last and fatal disease: *the disease of the mind*. In *Ulysses* Joyce gives us the complete identification of the artist with the tomb in which he buries himself. *Ulysses* has been spoken of as seeming like "a solid city." Not so much a solid city, it seems to me, as a dead world city. Just as there is, beneath the hollow dynamism of the city, an appalling weariness, a monotony, a fatigue insuperable, so in the works of Proust and Joyce the same qualities manifest themselves... The one uses the city as a universe, the other as an atom. The curtain never falls. Meanwhile the world of living men and women is huddling in the wings clamoring for the stage.

(Henry Miller,  
*Max and the White Phagocytes*, 1938)

When trying to define the nature of today's Hollywood, the word solipsistic increasingly comes to mind. Indeed it is now only rarely that one sees an American film whose interest is not confined to confirming a once vital art-form's retreat into a state of uncreative insularity and self-reference. It makes little difference here whether we are talking about the lower level of commercial output or the work of such acclaimed art-house *auteurs* as Joel Coen and Jim Jarmusch, for the solipsism of, say, the *Lethal Weapon* or *Die Hard* films, which eradicate the possibility of any thematic complexity by constantly parodying the conventional language in which that complexity could be expressed, finds its perfect complement in the empty formalism of *Barton Fink*, which erases external reference by enclosing us within the mind of a character for whom, tellingly, the film can feel nothing but contempt, ironically duplicating in its structure the intellectual superiority which it makes such a show of condemning in its protagonist. It should, then, be clear why it is that films which attempt to reach out into the social arena have a tendency towards excess and hysteria, often resulting in a rupturing of the realist surface of the text, not, as in the work of Derek Jarman, in order to flatter the sensibilities of an audience which is capable of identifying signifiers of Brechtian distancing but out of a profound personal need to communicate politically within a cinema whose dominant tendencies are antagonistic to such a project. The ending of *School Daze*, with its repeated call to

"wake up," is an obvious example, as is Oliver Stone's *Talk Radio*, and while the tendency is in itself a healthy one, it is hardly surprising, given the current fracturing of the Left, that this desperation is left without any clear focus, and often degenerates into simple incoherence. The documentary coda of *Malcolm X*, for example, though on one level clearly motivated by a desire to resist closure by locating the film within a context of ongoing struggle (an operation far more successfully carried out in the use of the Rodney King beating in the opening credits), also serves, in direct contradiction of this project, to enshrine Malcolm as a traditional role-model/hero figure, thus erasing the complexity of attitude that the film had hitherto encouraged.

The seriousness of purpose evident here, however, ensures that there is little danger of confusing the strategies of Lee's film with those perhaps most closely associated (though there is hardly a shortage of culprits) with Arnold Schwarzenegger, whose persona both embodies an excessive reactionary ideal and simultaneously parodies itself. Amy Taubin has persuasively argued (*Sight and Sound*, September 1993) that Clint Eastwood's characteristic inflexibility of body registers both masculinity and the threat of otherness against which masculinity must constantly be on guard, and while this description may have the effect of making Eastwood and Schwarzenegger sound indistinguishable, the dialectic involved in Eastwood's image entails both the actual embodiment of 'the masculine,' the force and charisma of which are seen as a given, and its thoroughgoing critique, while what is parodied in Schwarzenegger's vehicles is not the investment of a reactionary ideal with a material form, but the excessiveness of this process—the ideal itself is not only untouched but reinforced.

Danny DeVito's mocking of Schwarzenegger's physique in *Twins* is a good example of this ploy, and Schwarzenegger is himself invoked to assist a similar project in *Die Hard* (*Last Action Hero* seems to go about as far in this direction as is conceivable). One can easily understand the precise nature of this kind of self-reference by comparing Elaine May's use of Warren Beatty and Dustin Hoffman in *Ishuar*, or Billy Wilder's merciless attack on Dean Martin's image in *Kiss Me, Stupid*, for the satire of these films is aimed not at star personas regarded as essentially solipsistic, but at the ideals of masculinity to which those personas refer.

This kind of distinction is crucial to any attempt to deal with the westerns of the 70s. Since these

films are often described as 'revisionist,' it is necessary to point out that the use of the word in this context makes no sense, for the very concept of 'genre' could not exist without generic works being engaged in a constant process of revision of the ideological contradictions by which the genre is structured. Nevertheless it seems clear that the traditional oppositions of the western became violently polarized in the 70s, with a considerable number beginning to discover a coherence that precluded the hesitation over values which made the oppositions useable, a discovery that, though it often issued only in a more or less specific feeling of despair, occasionally resulted (in, for example, *Heaven's Gate* and *Pat Garrett & Billy the Kid*) in an explicit call for radical change. At the same time, however, the genre attempted a recovery by redefining the questioning of generic structures as generalized parody. The preference of an audience that was shortly to elect Ronald Reagan for *Blazing Saddles*, the most commercially successful western of the period, is obviously of great significance, for the satire of Brooks' film can easily be mistaken for a continuation, in a comic mode, of the more 'serious' works' projects. Brooks, however, is only interested in conventions to the extent that he is able to declare his superiority to them, and the attack on racism which his film purports to undertake is actually an attack on a genre which is theorized as incapable of sustaining such a project on its own terms. One might compare Altman's *Buffalo Bill and the Indians*, which proposes Bill Cody's Wild West Show as a precursor of the Hollywood western. Altman is like Brooks in his desire to subject the genre to extensive criticism, but unlike Brooks his attack is on generic roots, for the Wild West Show is no inert metaphor, but a historical fact with a direct relationship to the process

by which the real is converted into mythology. Altman's point is that it is also a fact in the formation of a genre which this film, by its very existence, demonstrates to be simultaneously implicated in, and fully capable of delivering a devastating critique of, the myth-making process.

In the 80s, however, the majority of westerns produced were facile send-ups, but the fact that the horror film has followed a similar trajectory in this period should not encourage us to believe that there is anything inevitable about it. Andrew Britton has claimed (*Movie* 27/78) that "the unfolding of ideological contradictions tends continually to readmit, in however fragmentary a form, the history which the genre functions to redefine," and while Jonathan Romney has adduced *Last Action Hero* as evidence that "the action genre is itself worn out" (*Sight and Sound* August 1993), it seems less likely that generic conventions have a tendency to use themselves up than that they will inevitably produce insights so radical that the culture by which they were determined will find them intolerable and enact a process of recuperation by deconstruction.

This would explain why it is that artists of explicitly radical sympathies such as Clint Eastwood (*Unforgiven*), Martin Scorsese (*Cape Fear*), Michael Cimino (*The Sicilian*) and Elaine May (*Ishtar*) are still able to create masterpieces by working in supposedly 'dead' generic forms without the least sense of incongruity, while the self-conscious deference towards Hollywood's past indulged in by more right-wing figures leads to a conservative nostalgia in which the most reactionary elements of a genre are siphoned off and celebrated. This trend finds its first tentative expression in the films of Peter Bogdanovich and achieves full realization in the work of Lawrence Kasdan (*Body Heat*, *Silverado*, the script for *Raiders of the Lost Ark*), but its hall-mark is the bastardization of the Capraesque which virtually defines the contemporary American cinema.

The collusion of the critics in this situation is, or at least should be, blatantly transparent. Auteurism, for example, may have come a long way since the days when it was suggested that the director's 'inscription' was somehow inserted into an already existing structure which the critic could, according to taste, either dismiss as 'interference' or condemn as 'the dominant ideology,' but this kind of thinking appears horribly prophetic when one considers Tim Burton's *Batman* films, with their schizophrenic audience address: on the one hand are the elements of action contemptuously pitched at the buffoons in

the local Odeon, on the other are invocations of early German cinema and imagery which signifies a 'personal vision.' The sensibility required to gain pleasure from a car chase is, of course, not markedly different from that which delights in noting references to the work of Fritz Lang, and those texts which attempt to disguise their own superficiality by putting forward a failure to integrate thematic material as evidence that this difference does not exist merely throw into sharp relief the kind of discourse represented by Hollywood at its finest. When we watch, say, *The Searchers*, we are at no point able to effect a separation of the film's levels of meaning, to say that *here* is the scaffolding of 'the western' and *here* a Homeric epic or inquiry into the validity of the Hero; on the contrary, each term is inextricable from the other, their harmony being a prerequisite of the film's complexity of expression.

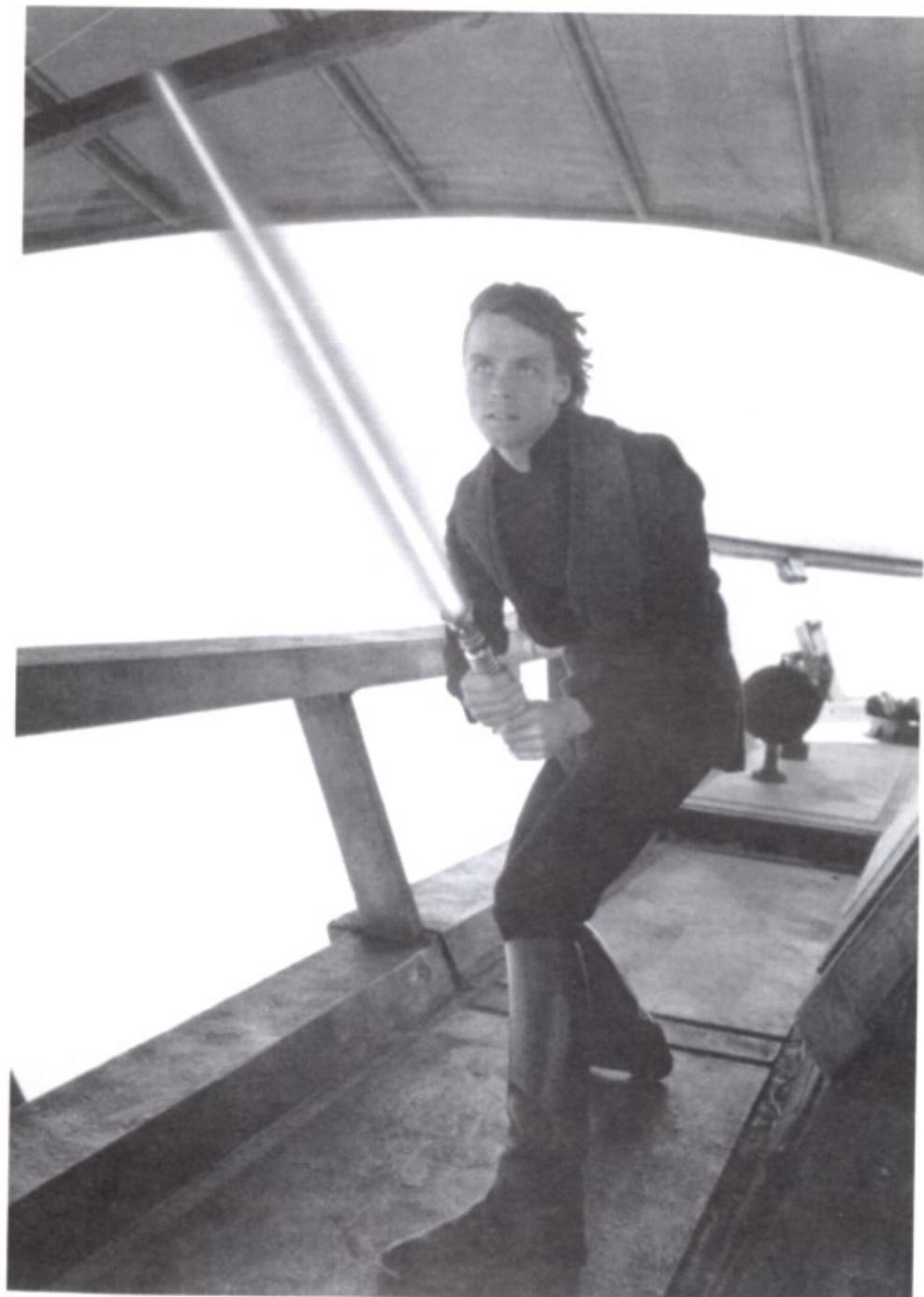
All of this will, in any case, have little interest one way or the other to the majority of cultural commentators, since the traditional responsibilities of criticism have been thoroughly obscured by the current dominance of two closely linked trends: an obsession with 'The Film Business' and the rise of the critic as superstar. Readers who doubt either the veracity of this claim, or the seriousness of the implied consequences, would do well to ponder the following...

**Unlike Stallone, Schwarzenegger never took himself too seriously. Whereas Rambo was seen as the embodiment of Reagan's macho, self-determination culture, for Schwarzenegger the Conan films were just good business.**

(Alexander McGregor,  
*Time Out* 1038, July 11-18, 1990)

**Nor can he (Philip French) resist a good joke. I remember his capsule review for a TV screening of Anthony Mann's *Fall of the Roman Empire*, in which he said that though visually stunning 'the script suggests more five gibbons and a typewriter than one Gibbon and a book,' the humour of which was only slightly diminished when I finally saw the film and thought the script rather good.**

(Sean French,  
*Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1990)



*Return of The Jedi*

Mr. McGregor's piece neatly serves to underline the assumptions which limit writing of this kind, the essential problem being the repression of politics. It is, admittedly, true that the 'macho, self-determination culture' is explicitly labeled Reaganite, but the crudity of the category ensures that McGregor is blind to Stallone and Schwarzenegger's relationship to the ideology which they represent. The notion of 'just good business' is, after all, far from incompatible with Reaganism, and the use of irony in the Schwarzenegger films, seen in this context as indicative of the business-man's cultivated disinterest, allows the writer to perceive an obsession with the body's transformation into the ultimate phallus, and a dedication to the accumulation of capital as being somehow opposed, rather than two sides of the same coin.

I have quoted Mr. French as an illustration of the critic-as-superstar phenomenon, but the piece's real interest lies in the absolute candour with which the writer exposes the underlying assumptions of this kind of journalism while maintaining an attitude of unqualified approval. Criticism has here severed all connection with "the common pursuit of true judgement" posited by F.R. Leavis, and become the forum for a display of the author's wit, the realization that this 'wit' actually involves a misrepresentation of the text under discussion serving not, as one might expect, as the basis for a repudiation of the discourse, but as an opportunity to demonstrate the frivolity of the entire critical enterprise by urbanely declaring that it doesn't much matter anyway.

All of this would not greatly concern us were it not for the fact that the assumptions of most supposedly 'serious' criticism are essentially indistinguishable. The reading of the Hollywood production system undertaken by David Bordwell and his associates, though decorated in the language of Marxism, turns out to be based on precisely the same value system as that of *Empire* or *Premiere*. For Mr. Bordwell, of course, Hollywood is a Bad object, for the fan magazines a Good object, but both share a tendency to extrapolate "Hollywood" from the general movements of capitalism which contextualize it, and to produce actual films as the inert products of this system despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. The *kind* of concern represented here can, in the right hands, provide a genuinely useful critical tool (for a model example see Chris Hugo's "The Big Combo: Production Conditions and the Film Text" in *'The Movie Book of Film Noir'*), but only when motivated by a desire to more fully comprehend cinematic works, rather than to demon-

strate yet again the theorist's superiority to a body of work which is already 'known.'

Similarly the apparently inexhaustible popularity of Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (*Screen*, Autumn 1975) is clearly indicative of a need to believe that the Hollywood film has been definitively accounted for, the intensity of this need, shared by both the author and her admirers, being strong enough to withstand the demonstration, which has been repeatedly offered, that Mulvey's readings of films are blatantly inaccurate. Like Bordwell in his account of production conditions, Mulvey uses the language of radical politics merely as window-dressing for a discourse whose assumptions are fundamentally incompatible with the categories invoked. 'Feminism' here serves much the same function as 'wit' in the work of Philip French, the reader's discovery that the theory can only exist at the expense of the object merely confirming the object's detestability.

The situation described here is unquestionably a lamentable one, and it seems doubtful that any previous historical period has seen such a mutuality of interests between the ruling class, the texts produced for popular consumption and the discourses available to discuss those texts. There are, however, not only counter-currents, however marginalized, in both film-making and criticism, but signs of more significant change, notably in the now widespread disenchantment with postmodernism. Progress, if it is not exactly being made, can at least be glimpsed on the horizon (one should place particular importance on the engagement of Cimino's post-*Heaven's Gate* work with the question of what an intelligent popular cinema would look like in the present climate), and it is only an apparent contradiction that this progress involves a return to a set of values which have already been rejected. If it is now virtually impossible to suggest the desirability of a 'return to old values' without sounding like Michael Medved or Patrick Buchanan, this is indicative of just how far the available discourses have been co-opted by the Right. Nevertheless an attempt to revitalize contemporary American film-making by using the classical Hollywood cinema as a model of radical intervention within a culture could, if it is unmarked by either nostalgia or postmodern cynicism, provide a genuine challenge to the prevailing right-wing hegemony. In the words of Emerson, "let the breath of new life be breathed...through the forms already existing."

# *Persona* Revisited



**by Robin Wood**

What follows is more an addendum to than a revision of the account of *Persona* I offered in my book on Bergman 25 years ago (*Ingmar Bergman*, Studio Vista/Praeger, 1969). I still stand by most of what I wrote then, and the relevance of its main thrust has scarcely lessened in an age that has given us the Gulf War Massacre, the horrors of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Somalia, the rise of the serial killer, the daily revelations of the pervasiveness of child abuse and violence against women... Second, I want to reopen the question of *Persona* from a somewhat different (but not

incompatible) perspective, and at the same time without repudiating my earlier testimony to the film's immediate impact, which there seems no reason to rewrite: I don't think I can say what I said any better, I simply want to say something else. Thirdly—by way of leading to the "something else"—I want to fill what now appears, inescapably, the gaping hole in my earlier analysis, an undertaking made possible by social developments of which I have only become aware since the early 70s: feminism, the gay/lesbian movement, the interrogation of gender and sexuality. These have, it seems to me, necessarily changed our whole attitude to cinema, often revolutionizing the interpretation of specific movies, revealing what was there but unacknowledged: the Sternberg/Dietrich movies of the '30s, for example, were previously incomprehensible.

The "gaping hole" is not a defect merely of my own analysis. It is shared by a far more prestigious and influential account of the film, that of Susan Sontag (1). The hole can be defined by asking the question, Is it possible to imagine in a version of *Persona* in which the two leading characters are men, an actor and a male nurse? (The reader is invited to pause here and make the attempt...).

The answer must, I think, be "No," or, at most, "Only with extreme difficulty, and it would be a very different film." And one might go on from that to consider that both Sontag and myself refer to the issue of lesbianism only casually, within a single sentence. She at least used the word; I acknowledged this—as I now see it—crucial aspect of the film only in a passing reference to Alma's wanting Elisabet as "combined elder-sister-and-lover." I would add that I am here employing the term "lesbian" in its widest sense, with all the implications it has derived from the women's movement; patriarchy wishes to understand it merely as indicating a "kinky" and perhaps titillating sexual deviancy. The meanings it has accrued are far more complex and far more threatening: the bonding of women in mutual support against male dominance; the refusal to accept that a woman is defined by her relationships with men; the sufficiency of woman-to-woman relationships (which may include, but are not restricted to or necessarily defined by, sexuality).

Bergman has often been accused of opportunism in his use of political actualities lifted out of their context and reduced to signifiers of an inner, personal, psychological turmoil: the Vietnam and Warsaw

Ghetto images in *Persona*, the parallels between Vietnam and his imaginary, ideologically vague, civil war in *The Shame*. Such charges, which seemed valid at the time (and perhaps remain so on a superficial level), must also be looked at in their historical context: they belong to a period before the more profound and radical revelations of the women's movement had received any wide dissemination and acceptance. At its deeper levels, *Persona* has only gradually become readable over the past two decades: like *The Shame* (which is in many respects a more expository, more lucid, more conscious development of its essential themes), it exists at the confluence of "politics" and sexual politics. Hence it allows me to take up, and bring into sharper focus, the concerns of my article "Fascism/Cinema" published in *CineAction* 18.

"Natural causes," "act of God" aside, it seems clear that the horrors of our world, which it is imperative now that we face squarely if we are to survive, must be attributed overwhelmingly to men: to men as individuals (for the issues of personal responsibility and personal guilt must not be evaded), but more generally to masculinity, as it has been socially constructed, and to its political extension "masculinism." Every political system in the world today (and as far back as history can take us) has been male-founded and male-dominated; the women who slot into these systems (as opposed to rejecting and opposing them) are able to do so only at the cost of repudiating their female specificity and denying the fact of women's oppression throughout history and continuing into the history we are currently living. It is vitally important that "herstory" be written, but the achievements it celebrates will inevitably be, by and large, the achievements of resistance. The female guards we see emerging from the concentration camps at the end of *Night and Fog* (to whom the female psychiatrist of *Persona* bears a certain significant resemblance) can stand as a grotesque but not inappropriate image of the women who lend themselves (for their own survival or material betterment) to patriarchy and masculinism.

When Elisabet cowers, appalled, from the Vietnam newsreel, and stares in horrified fascination at the Warsaw Ghetto photograph, she is expressing the sense of powerlessness that women (and sensitive males) experience in the face of horrors wrought by masculinism: the horrors that reproduce themselves

in generation after generation in the names of imperialism, nationalism, patriotism, organized religion, every existing system of which is at every level patriarchal—founded by men, sustained by men, promoted by men, for the safeguarding of male privilege. What the first (and finest) movement of *Persona* so magnificently and subtly dramatizes is the gradual, tentative empowerment of women through

shown little interest in Greek tragedy, either as a film maker or as a theatrical producer. He has, however, from very early in his career shown a marked interest in Freud, and Freud's first term for what he subsequently chose to call the "female Oedipus complex" was the "Electra complex": the process by which the female learns to accept her patriarchally prescribed role, relinquishing the father and her own

Bergman directing a scene that was subsequently abandoned (in the film, Liv Ullmann does not go fishing).



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female bonding—"lesbianism" in the wider sense. The bonding disintegrates, for reasons that are to some extent inherent from the outset, for Elisabet and Alma are incompatible not from mere "differences of character" but on the deepest levels, more cultural than personal.

The difference is sometimes seen in terms of innocence and experience; it seems more profitable to describe it in terms of conformity and non-conformity, acquiescence in and resistance to social conditioning, the woman who enters into and accepts her "correct" place in the "Symbolic Order" of patriarchy and the woman who refuses. Bergman's choice of *Electra* as the play during which Elisabet chooses (at first intuitively, later as a conscious decision) not to speak gets great emphasis from the repeated images of the actress on stage and in costume. A puzzling choice at first sight: Bergman has

innate masculinity, identifying with the symbolically castrated mother. (The inappropriateness of the Electra myth to Freud's theory seems screamingly obvious, and one understands why he abandoned the term. Yet it lingers on in general parlance, and I am convinced Bergman had it in mind here.) By refusing to continue with the play, Elisabet is rejecting her "correct" position in the Symbolic Order.

As Elisabet is often perceived as a "monster," evil and sadistic (a view of the character which the film's second half regrettably makes partly tenable), it is

<sup>1</sup> Sontag's famous article (written in the pre-VCR era), contains a number of factual errors which I have never seen challenged. Her account of the opening of the film is extremely confused, jumbling up the introductory images with those of the (quite different) credits sequence; and it is Elisabet who sucks Alma's blood, not *vice versa*.

important to emphasize that, initially at least, Bergman invests her with quasi-heroic qualities of intelligence, integrity, compassion, and even nobility. This is established in the privileged moment when we first see her alone, outside Alma's point of view. Alma visits her in her room, drawing the curtains to let in the sunlight, chattering to her in her cheerful, banal way, the socially sanctioned stereotype of the "good little nurse" perfect in her training, switching on the radio beside Elisabet's bed. A play is in progress, perhaps a fragment of a soap opera, in which a woman is begging for forgiveness. After a few seconds Elisabet begins to laugh, silently, scornfully, bitterly. Alma interprets the reaction purely in terms of "bad acting," not questioning the content, and when Elisabet (in one of her abrupt changes of mood) angrily switches off the radio, treats her patient to some trite, well-intentioned, condescending remarks about the importance of art. It is clear, I think, that Alma's interpretation of Elisabet's reaction is incorrect, or at least incomplete. What Elisabet finds, first funny, then infuriating, is not merely the acting but the play's stereotypical reproduction of patriarchy's prescription for the cure and incorporation into "normality" of the transgressive woman: to ask forgiveness. Alma then finds some classical music (nice and soothing, to distract a difficult patient from her psychological problems) and leaves the room.

The music is the slow movement of Bach's E major violin concerto, and its potential effect is quite beyond Alma's comprehension. I noted in my book on Bergman the importance for him of Bach, in the later films, from *Through a Glass Darkly* on. Three instances seem especially apposite: the moment in *The Silence* when Ester/Ingrid Thulin, in the desolation of her life and a foreign hotel room, listens briefly to the Goldberg Variations on a transistor radio; the moment in *Cries and Whispers* of passionate "lesbian" contact between the two sisters (Thulin and Liv Ullmann), celebrated by the surging on the soundtrack of one of the suites for unaccompanied cello; and the performance of another of the suites in *Autumn Sonata* that marks the one moment in the film of repose and togetherness, wrought by the music. On one level the use of Bach's music is consistent through the films: it signifies for Bergman a possible transcendent wholeness, a spiritual potential yearned for but forever beyond the characters' reach. But (as Tony French remarks in his supple and sensitive analysis of *Through a Glass*

*Darkly* in this issue), the specific piece is not exactly consoling, certainly not "nice and soothing" to anyone sensitive to its nuances. As Elisabet listens, her face seems to reflect for a moment the beauty, compassion and nobility of the music, as well as its quality of yearning. Then she abruptly turns on her back and covers her face with her hands in a gesture of despair, and the image gradually darkens until her features are obscured.

The rich implications of this moment (I know of no artist who, working at the peak of his/her creativity, can pack more meaning into an apparently simple, almost "empty" scene) are developed in the second moment of intimacy we are permitted with Elisabet, outside Alma's consciousness: the "Vietnam" scene. I should say here that I cannot follow Hubert L. Cohen (in his continuously stimulating and perceptive, and meticulously researched, *Ingmar Bergman: The Art of Confession*, Twayne Publishers 1993) in confidently asserting that this is Elisabet's "nightmare": one has only to invoke the freedom from "realist" constraints that modernism permits, and the high level of stylization Bergman has by this point established, to accept it as a representation of waking experience. But ultimately it doesn't matter: "nightmarish" the scene certainly is.

Elisabet paces her room at night, sleepless, troubled, her hands clasped and pressed to her chin in a gesture of frustration, as if she doesn't know what to do, or whether what she is doing is any sort of answer. She moves to the door as if to open it—deciding, perhaps, to abandon her stance and make contact. Then she turns to the images on the television: a newsreel showing the self-immolation of a Buddhist monk, his will so strong that he can maintain the gesture of an arm raised in protest even as he burns agonizingly to death. Does she empathize with his agony, even as we (surely) empathize with her appalled recoil? Or see him as carrying her own protest to its logical conclusion, a conclusion that obviously terrifies her? It is evident, in any case, that she partly identifies with him—with his agony, his protest, his ability to go all the way—in his acknowledgement of the masculinist horrors of a world characterized by aggression, domination and mindless cruelty, and in the possibility of passive protest and the awareness of its probable uselessness.

There follows immediately the scene of the husband's letter, read aloud to her by Alma, confronting her with her "correct," rejected role as wife and mother. The husband is sympathetic but uncom-

prehending, quoting a remark of Elisabet's made shortly before her withdrawal as if it were entirely devoid of ambiguity or possible irony: "Only now I understand what marriage is about." What he has learnt from her is that they should look at each other as if they were "two anxious children, full of kindness and good resolutions"—including, presumably, the resolution to "be a good girl." He then asks if she "remembers saying all that," suggesting at least the possibility that she didn't, that he is imposing on her his own interpretation: it must strike us as somewhat incongruous that she followed such remarks by "grabbing at his belt," presumably in a gesture of aggressive sexual desire or desperation. She crumples the letter and tears in two the enclosed photograph of their son.

Bergman moves at once to the scene with the psychiatrist, the most obvious logic of which is to follow Elisabet's decisive rejection of the traditional female roles with its contemporary alternative, the "strong" woman who has made her way in the man's world, on its terms, within yet another overwhelmingly patriarchal institution whose main function has been that of restoring its patients (victims?) to "normality" rather than to health. She understands Elisabet about as much as the psychiatrist at the end of *Psycho* understands Norman Bates, and with much the same aim, that of explaining her away. At least she is less complacent, as if the struggle to keep at bay all the realities that lie beyond and threaten the concept of "normality" were a terrific strain and won only at great human cost. To understand Elisabet would be to see that concept shattered irreparably; she therefore resorts to a brutal, bitter sarcasm, cruel, insensitive and repressive, if perhaps necessary for her own self-defence. (The character, who appears in the film less than five minutes, is surely among the most brilliant "cameos" in the cinema, a whole life, and the necessary judgement on it, suggested with extraordinary economy and precision).

Alma, the good little girl who clasps her hands behind her back as she attends to the instructions of her "headmistress" in a classic stance of obedience, accepts her conditioning without question. She has chosen one of the professions considered appropriate for women, whose duty it is to serve; she identifies both with her own mother ("My mother was a nurse until she got married") in the "correct" Oedipal

way, and with her mother-figures, the retired nurses in the home she describes to Elisabet; she automatically assumes (it scarcely seems a choice) that she will marry Karl-Henrik and bear his children ("It's nothing to worry about. It's so safe"). The contact with Elisabet at once rescues her from this fate and condemns her to the desperation and torment which, at the end of the film, she may or may not be ready to transcend. The film (and Bibi Andersson) is quite extraordinary, I think, in suggesting that, while on the surface Alma is fully acquiescent in the patriarchal order and the woman's ignominious role within it, deep down she has always been aware of this falseness: Elisabet disturbs and frightens her from the first moments of contact.

Elisabet is a deeply disturbed woman, hence a potentially dangerous one. It is greatly to the film's credit that it makes no attempt to "explain" her in terms of personal psychology: her resistance to patriarchy, her refusal of the "dominant ideology," is sufficient. Those who remain comfortably within it cannot understand that. I have been during my life both "Alma" and "Elisabet," and I understand it very well. I also understand that "Alma" will always be a part of "Elisabet," just as "Elisabet" has always been a part of "Alma." The ideology is our home—the home in which we have grown up. While we remain within it, however constricted we may feel, we "have nothing to worry about. It's so safe": we know the rules. As soon as we step outside, renouncing it, we are alone, there are no rules any more, we must discover new ones or construct our own. Though less abrupt, it is as frightening and disorienting as the experience of birth must be, when the infant leaves the security and warmth of the womb for a strange new world in which its first experience is usually to get slapped and made to scream. Like birth, it is also a necessary one, if our civilization is to progress. Hence the ambivalence of our feelings toward Elisabet: she is dangerous, frightening, "other," yet admirable and necessary. (It is those who refuse to see the two women as more than "characters," to be judged on the level of personal psychology and behaviour, who find her a monster.) What Bergman cannot do (because he is a man?—because he is Swedish?—because he is Bergman?) is dramatize the possibility of constructing a new "home" of solidarity and mutual supportiveness. It can never be as secure as the home we have relinquished, since it lacks the sanction of tra-

dition, yet it makes life and further development possible; it enables us to develop our creativity, not negate it in impotent rage. It is surprising, however, how far the film goes—at least through its first half—in suggesting the possibility.

Elisabet's rejection of her role in the patriarchal order is remarkably complete, refusing all compromises: one might see her rigor as the positive aspect of her ruthlessness, or see the ruthlessness (which all but destroys Alma) as its unfortunate consequence. Before her silence, she has rejected both marriage and motherhood, and not merely as abstract ideas. The moment when she deliberately tears in two the photograph of her child is deeply shocking, registering the brutality, the stifling of natural feeling, the psychic cost, which the rigor enforces: she cannot allow herself to get sucked back into the life she has rejected, and the emotions that belong to it. (I shall return to Bergman's attitude to motherhood later, as it becomes a crux of the film's later episodes.) Her silence is the logical culmination of this process, at once the most rigorous statement of her refusal to participate in a system she repudiates and a retreat—the silence becoming as much a protective barrier as an assertion of defiance. It also strikingly anticipates the position that certain feminists have developed out of Lacan: language itself is patriarchal, the acquisition of language being a decisive step in entry into the Symbolic Order. The quandary this produces (if language is patriarchal, how can a feminist speak?) is not only Elisabet's.

## The Beach Orgy

The chink in Alma's ideological armour is her memory, half shameful, half nostalgic, of the so-called "orgy" on the beach, her one potentially liberating experience, though she cannot afford to recognize it in those terms. Its significance lies in the thoroughness with which it breaks every traditional rule of sanctioned sexual conduct. It is remarkably systematic in this. 1. *Monogamy*. Not only is Alma "unfaithful" to Karl-Henrik, she has sex with *two* boys in quick succession. 2. *Privacy*. There appear to be no spectators, but the activity takes place on a public beach. 3. *Children's sexuality*. We are not told the ages of the two boys, but it seems clear (from the word "pojkar" and the fact that they need encouragement and guidance) that they are "boys" in the literal sense rather than the sense in which a male of any age may be called a "boyfriend"—pre-

sumably in their early 'teens, just pubescent, inexperienced. 4. *Active female sexuality*. The women throughout take the active role, encouraging the boys for their own pleasure and reveling in their own sexuality outside the bounds of male desire. 5. *Group sex*. The women share partners, and it is clear from Alma's narration that much of the pleasure of the encounter comes from sharing, watching each other, participating emotionally and sensually in each other's enjoyment. Hence 6. *Lesbianism*. the women do not have actual sexual contact with each other, but they lie side by side throughout and it is clear that much of the stimulus arises from this close physical proximity and the pleasure of each in the other's pleasure.

The "orgy" on the beach bursts all the bonds of social convention that restrict the free expression of human sexuality. But more important still are the two ways in which Bergman caps Alma's narrative. She tells Elisabet that after she got home the same night, she and Karl-Henrik made love, and it was better than it had ever been before. Alma finds this surprising but it is perfectly logical: far from damaging the couple's relationship, the encounter on the beach improved it by freeing the woman's sexual desire. Inevitably, social convention was restored: the fact of the encounter couldn't be shared with her lover, and Alma, finding herself pregnant, had an abortion. It may seem incongruous to describe an abortion as the restoration of social convention, but it is clear here, I think, that the motivation is less Alma's reluctance to have a child than the inevitable uncertainty as to the child's parentage.

The other way in which Bergman caps the narration is by concluding it with the two women in bed together, and with the first intimations of lesbian contact (if not necessarily "sexual," then certainly physical). Alma relives her experience by recounting it to Elisabet, and it is clearly the act of *sharing* that makes possible the women's physical contact: Elisabet, touched by Alma's shame and confusion, comforts her by stroking her face and taking her in her arms. It is, on one level, a maternal gesture, a reminder that the source of lesbianism is in the intimate contact of mother and child.

## The Lesbian "Fantasy"

The scene in which Alma, waking in the night, sees Elisabet coming into her room and they caress

in front of a mirror is marked as a privileged moment in the film. It is the first moment (if we leave aside the pre-credit and credit sequences) whose status in relation to the narrative's "reality" is uncertain, and this uncertainty is underlined by a stylistic break: instead of the clear high-definition images that have characterized the visual style up to that point, it has a misty, dreamlike quality. But its status as dream or hallucination is not clear either: Alma first gets up for nothing more unusual than to get herself a drink of water, and the mistiness is rationally accounted for by the sound of a distant foghorn. It anticipates the notion of fusion that will become so prominent later (and to which it seems to me undue significance has been attached, by critics and by Bergman himself); but it does so in a strongly positive way, the intermingling of the two women in a gesture of great tenderness suggesting the mutual identification from which Alma will later violently recoil in rage and horror, yet remaining here less a matter of "fusion" than of intimate togetherness. Most important, it rep-



resents the one *positive* memory that Alma retains at the end of the film, reliving it as she looks for the last time in a mirror before leaving the beach-house, and reacting with an expression of regret and loss. If the film leaves us with any hope for Alma's future it is surely in this retained image of female togetherness.

Is it a "real" experience or Alma's fantasy? We cannot, I think, be absolutely certain. If we incline to the latter it is largely because, when Alma asks her if she visited her in the night, Elisabet shakes her head and looks puzzled, and she has no immediately apparent reason to lie. And Alma is the one who has so much to gain from achieving identity with a strong, independent, emancipated woman. Yet the film implies, through the specifics of cinematic progression from image to image, that Elisabet has also benefited from an experience that may not have happened. The shot that immediately follows the nocturnal lesbian encounter is a close-up of

her, on the rocks by the sea the next morning, taking a photograph directly into camera: photographing the spectator, perhaps, but also, more directly, photographing the cameraman, and by implication the director/screenwriter, the males who presume to control her both as the character Elisabet Vogler and as the actress Liv Ullmann. Never has the male gaze been returned more pointedly, empowered directly (if we respect the sense of the editing) by lesbian togetherness.

Given the radical breach of that moment—the look straight into camera at the persons controlling and viewing the film—it seems possible to question the authority of Elisabet's subsequent denial of the nocturnal encounter. I have tried (with the help of videotape) the experiment of watching twice in succession the moment of denial (Elisabet/Ullmann shaking her head), the first time assuming that she is telling the truth, the second time assuming that she is lying because she can't cope with the implications—the responsibilities—of a close relationship with Alma. The image works perfectly both ways (a perfect validation of the "Kuleshov" experiment?). One has to ask, then, whether the ambiguity of the nocturnal union represents a fully achieved artistic effect (that is to say, of realized significance in the total context of the film) or a hesitation, perhaps a fear, on the part of Bergman. For the ambiguity makes possible the film's subsequent perverse choice of narrative route, its descent into types of material that are disturbing in the wrong way—disturbing not because they confront us with an awareness of the horrors of our civilization but because they draw us into unproductive and essentially morbid personal obsessions, at the same time—and as necessary corollary—rejecting any possible alternative movement toward health.

When I wrote the book containing the earlier account of *Persona* I failed sufficiently to acknowledge the ways in which Bergman's astonishing creativity (the reality of which cannot be doubted) is repeatedly thwarted in the later films by neurotic blockage. In certain films this takes a very precise form: the blockage is literally enacted in the film's structure. There is a strong positive movement towards health, abruptly halted by either a hiatus (*The Shame, A Passion*) or the unprepared and arbitrary introduction of a new plot development (*The Touch*), followed in turn by the revelation that

"everything has gone wrong"—the "going wrong" produced not by any sort of narrative logic but by the arbitrary intervention of the author (literally in *A Passion*, where Bergman's own voice tells us that "Six months have gone by and ...").

*Persona* is a slightly different case because here the shift in tone is not unmotivated: whether the nocturnal visit took place or not, Alma has clearly misread the *degree* of Elisabet's involvement with her; and the fateful letter (especially if we take Elisabet's failure to seal it as an unconscious wish that Alma read it) is Elisabet's way of distancing herself from a relationship that is beginning to threaten her. All this, and Alma's response to her illicit reading of the letter, is plausible enough. One may ask, however, whether it is not altogether too flimsy a pretext to bear the symbolic and emotional weight of all that follows. Elisabet's self-imposed silence may be theoretically admirable and heroic (though useless) as a response to the horrors of a masculinist-dominated world, but when it prohibits all explanation and discussion with another equally distressed woman it becomes perverse cruelty, its original motivation pointless in such a context. And one is forced to ask whether Bergman himself is not unhealthily complicit in the cruelties and the anguish that overwhelm the film's final third—whether the combination of sadism and masochism belongs less to the fictional characters than to their (male) creator. Repeated viewings (I have found) do nothing to clarify the obscurity of the "five episodes" where the film moves into a dimension of psychic fantasy. My own experience has been that the film's first half retains its fascination and its resonance, while the sections following Elisabet's perusal of the Warsaw Ghetto photograph become increasingly difficult to sit through, not because they are disturbing but because they yield so little, are merely unpleasant in the worst sense, as representations not of the horrors of existence but of the artist's own sickness, in which he permits his authentic creativity to drown.

Particularly obtrusive and (in the bad sense) disturbing—and, I might add, on repetition *boring*—is the episode of the twice-told story. It is surely the passage in the film that most taxes the viewer's patience, its insistent and reiterated morbidity far exceeding any meaning one may legitimately extract from it. The meaning, however, such as it is, constitutes a significant part of the problem: the horror of Elisabet that the film communicates here (negating

all the character's positive aspects) is motivated solely by the accusation that she was a bad mother, and the sequence culminates in Alma's appalled awareness (and hysterical rejection) of the notion that she and Elisabet are somehow identical, the only possible basis for which is that she once had an abortion. Worse, one cannot help wondering whether, on some (perhaps unconscious) level, Bergman equates what Elisabet is alleged to have done to her child with the fate of the young boy in the Warsaw Ghetto. All sense of the admirable aspects of Elisabet and her protest is here submerged in Bergman's animus against a woman who rejected the role of nurturer.

That something damagingly personal (in the narrow sense) here throws the film askew seems confirmed some years later by one of the worst films of Bergman's maturity, *Autumn Sonata*. Bergman's initial project seems to have been to balance, while pitting against each other, two embittered women (mother and daughter) and two great actresses (Ingrid Bergman and Liv Ullmann); and for its first half the film seems also to be attempting a corresponding balance of sympathies (which it also makes a feeble and totalling unsuccessful attempt to restore in the cross-cutting of its conclusion). Progressively, the balance collapses, and the film degenerates into what amounts to little more than a hysterical diatribe against a woman who neglected her children for her career as a great concert pianist. The parallel with Elisabet is obvious: the Charlotte of *Autumn Sonata* is virtually an elaboration of the "twice-told story." The worst that one can reasonably say of Charlotte is that she should never have married and had children in the first place: presumably, like Elisabet, she allowed herself to be propelled into an inappropriate role by conventional expectations of the "womanly." Yet by the film's climax every evil has been heaped upon her, culminating in the ludicrously irrational charge (which she, equally irrationally, is made to accept) that she was solely responsible for her younger daughter's incurable, and surely physiological, degenerative disease. Ullmann's summation of her mother's evil (which the film doesn't explicitly endorse but certainly doesn't contradict) has to be heard to be believed: "People like you are a menace. You should be locked away so you can't do any harm." It is common knowledge that Ingrid Bergman tried to rebel against the burdens of guilt and wickedness heaped upon her character; her own personal history might

suggest that on some level (conscious or unconscious) Bergman was using the actress herself in a particularly cruel and malicious way. (One might compare—very favourably—Rossellini's complex and sympathetic ways of building on that same personal history, especially in *Europa 51*.)

With a naiveté quite astounding for an artist of such proven intelligence, Bergman insisted in an interview that he does not have an ideology (one might as well say "I don't have a nervous system"). One must assume that he mistakes the ideology that has consistently circumscribed his achievement—what one might define as "the ideology of the human condition"—for "truth": human relations are simply *like that*, it has little (if anything) to do with social organization (let alone the "economic base"), or with the construction of the individual psyche within a specific cultural formation, and there is really nothing much anyone can do about it. In the first half of *Persona* (conceived, significantly, in the wake of a severe illness and breakdown) he comes dangerously close to challenging this ideological position; the last third (formally the most "progressive" work he has ever done, if one equates progressiveness with avant-gardism) mercilessly reimposes it.

End note: This article is from my work-in-progress, *Toward Liberation: Sexual Politics and Narrative Film*, to be published by Columbia University Press in 1995.

#### To the Readers,

To set right a possible misunderstanding: I was working in Mexico at the time of the collective meeting to which Ms. Banning refers in her note in the last issue, and played no part whatever in 'insisting' that she publish my contribution.

# Suffering into Ideology:

by Tony French

*Såsom i en Spegel* ("As in a mirror," usually translated as *Through a Glass Darkly*) came out in 1961. Set on an island in the Baltic, it has four characters: David, a novelist; his daughter Karin, married to Martin, a psychiatrist; and his teenage son Minus.

David and Martin both come from the outer world of careers and action. David, a widower, back from a holiday in Switzerland, about to leave again to be a tour-guide in Yugoslavia, has only come home for a brief holiday and to finish his latest novel. He is not yet considered a great novelist, and to judge by the sentence we hear and see him writing and rewriting, after being up all night, he isn't even a good one, striving, in the given case, to polish a sentence—"She came running toward him, panting with expectation, scarlet-faced in the keen wind"—whose real fault is that it is shot through with True Romance sentimentalism. We hear that a relationship he has apparently been having with a young woman, Marianne, has collapsed; he is insomniac and in pain with a duodenal ulcer; and, as the story goes on, his apparent inauthenticity as a person becomes, such is Bergman's and Gunnar Björnstrand's genius, pretty well as painful to us as it is to him.

Martin comes self-confidently from the assured professional world of the polyclinic: his cold, closed, composed self (so different from David's with his constant play of feature, now falsely cheerful, now bewildered, now cast down) presents itself through, or hides behind, horn-rimmed glasses which are so strong that when he takes them off he screws up his eyes to peer helplessly at a world, at people, he can scarcely grasp except in clinical terms. Nor is he, as David is, much aware of his own inadequacies: it would be quite impossible to imagine him trying, as



right: Bergman directing *Through a Glass Darkly* above: Gunnar Björnstrand and Harriet Andersson in *Through a Glass Darkly*



# Bergman's *Såsom i en Spegel*



David recently says *he* has, to commit suicide and then losing courage at the last moment.

Karin—the one's daughter, the other's wife—has a few weeks since been discharged from a clinic where she has been having treatment, including ECT, for schizophrenia, from which her mother also suffered and of which she died. It is on her that the two older men, and her brother (and the film), focus their anxieties: is she really better, at least for the time being? Will she, or rather *when* will she, relapse? can they do anything for her in personal terms? should they treat her and respond to her as a normal person? isn't there something in her *being* that of itself reproaches and unsettles them—unsettles them not merely because Karin is necessarily unpredictable but also because she is a walking reminder of crevasses into which far more confident personalities are afraid to look lest they fall? Harriet Andersson plays Karin—not at first in the least twitchy or strained in her demeanour—in a way that suggests she is receiving transmissions, intuitions, from a source unknown to the males, as her ears (hyperacute since her treatments) strain to catch something beyond the pitch of our hearing, and her face unnervingly responds now to the seen and now to the other reality, her dark eyes always searching to see through the first to the second, as though the visible world were a glass through which, or a mirror in which, the truth were dimly to be seen.

Her young brother Minus, "fifteen years old and two metres tall," tormented by sex, seems at first the least important of the foursome, although from the first it is plain that he relates to Karin with a sensitivity—which includes a wincing awareness of her sexuality—that the others hardly approach. As the story goes on, his moral stature begins to equal his physical and, at the end, his last words are the film's—though whether they give or are meant to give a credible closure is, as we shall see, another matter.

I shall concentrate on half-a-dozen important sequences.

The family gather outside their cottage for a din-

ner cooked by David, Minus tactlessly joking that he should write cookery books instead of novels, so that the meal begins with false gaiety and then veers towards reproach as David reveals that, contrary to his promises, he'll soon be leaving for Yugoslavia. He hastily gives the others presents he claims he brought them from Switzerland, excuses himself, goes indoors and while they disparagingly suggest that he really got them in Stockholm and that they're unsuitable anyway, bursts—we can only see him in silhouette and through the doorway—into loud animal tears.

It is an extraordinary and shocking moment: the centreless man, incapable (as we think) of a true response or even a genuinely thoughtful gesture, turns out to be at least as aware of his plight as his relations are. Unexpectedly, if so far only for a moment, we see them through his eyes rather than the reverse: and in this way the film hints at its basic emotional structure—a succession of partial (and partially overlapping) views of each character, now from his/her viewpoint, now from the others'; and, embracing them all with astringent tenderness, the film's.

There follows the play-sequence: for David, his two children (accompanied by Martin on a guitar) act a play Minus has written, *The Artistic Haunting, or The Funeral Vault of Illusions*. Karin, from inside a summerhouse no less dilapidated than the cottage it serves, spectrally plays the ghost of a Castilian princess ("dead in childbirth in my thirteenth year"); Minus plays her once-mourning husband, now consoled and an artist. She promises him eternal life if he will join her and renounce the world; but he starts to wonder what he would be sacrificing his life for—eternity? love? art? So he opts out, and the princess returns disconsolate to her mausoleum for ever.

If David's presents to his family were careless, their present to him is only too pointed, as he notices, hiding his chagrin under forced enthusiasm: although, with the possible exception of Karin, they don't grasp how their play reflects back on them too. If David isn't the kind of artist who will sacrifice himself, only others, for and to his art, his son and son-in-law are equally bound into their own egotisms: Martin into the self-esteem of his medical career, Minus into his self-absorbed adolescence. This is as it should be, in this most human of worlds. Karin is the only one of the four who is prepared to follow her impulses where they take her, to virtual death.

The family disperse: David to try and finish his novel through the light long Swedish night, Karin and Martin to bed. As we follow them to their bedroom it becomes clear that Martin has little idea how to cope with his wife's condition except as a doctor; but he does try, in his own way, which is perhaps

made to seem more inept than it is by Karin's sense of being trapped ("the owls... look at you out of their yellow eyes") and beyond all help, and by her understandable sensitivity which makes her reject his endearment, "dear little Kaja," as infantilising her. To his physical desire she cannot respond at all.

At first light, rising up at the unearthly voice of a bird, she steals upstairs through a landing with furniture under dust-sheets, into an almost empty room with a window through which the rising sun lights up the leafy old wallpaper. Karin's face, at once gaunt and sensual, reverent and aroused, strong and helpless, turns towards a slit in the paper from which issue, punctuated by a distant and clearly real ship's horn, thin whispers which we, by now hearing through Karin's ears, know the other characters could never hear. As vivid tongues of fire run around the slit, Karin first clasps her hands as if in prayer, then, making an inarticulate noise, runs them over her body before sinking down, thighs apart, in ecstasy. It's a moment that doesn't just exhibit her but makes poignant her need for warm sensuality which Martin cannot give her or she him. Whatever is in the room can, she thinks.

Karin finds her father downstairs taking aspirin and wrestling with his novel, also apparently about erotic joy ("... panting with expectation ...") but neither real nor imaginary, just fake. His very body rebels against the falsity of his life—but he knows it. After he has gone out to take a breather with Minus, Karin reads his diary and finds that her case is hopeless, as her mother's had been, and that her father is appalled at his desire to observe her disintegration. Her deserted look, in which there is a suggestion that her suspicions have merely been confirmed, calls forth unconsoling Bach (the opening of the second cello suite, which we have also heard behind the credit-titles). When she goes back to seek solace and support from her husband we again feel the impossibility of his position as well as hers, especially when, after he has stretched the truth to console her and himself, she simultaneously throws herself on his mercy, bursting into tears as her father had, and taunts him by suggesting it would be nice if he had a real wife who would comfort him and give him lots of babies. The complex dissonant interchange between them—it is too long to summarize here—ends with her giving him a searing look of reproach which, in a mode typical of this film, seems both wholly merited and gratuitously cruel. The scene fades out with Karin's eyes holding the light longer than anything else.

So that by full sunup, when David and Martin sail for the mainland to get supplies, our consciousness is unravelling like Karin's. In this central sequence, a

conversation between the two older men in the boat separates the two parts of a continuous scene between Karin and Minus which occupies most of the day and sees Karin's final assumption into madness, with Minus being the mediator between her and us, and in the end her victim or beneficiary. (We don't know how much he has already grasped about her condition, either from what he has been told or from his own observation—not much, it would seem.)

Karin hears his Latin homework, steals his girlie magazine and comments on it with provocative scorn; shamed, he loses his temper, she apologizes with grace; and as their conversation drifts on we, with our privileged insight, begin to sense that something is crumbling inside Karin, a sense confirmed when, to extend her apology for violating his secret by revealing hers, she takes him upstairs to the old room, her gait now itself suggesting her lapse into the other world, that of the whispering leaves.

The world she describes to Minus, the one on the other side of the wall, is the opposite of her everyday one: full of gentle and loving people, some with radiant faces, waiting for Him who will come through the door; and she has, she says guiltily, chosen Him over Martin, whom she has rejected.

"Oh, a paranoiac schizophrenic," once said a psychiatrist friend of mine, characterizing Karin. "You mustn't *say* that!" I hotly retorted, "that's how Martin sees her." The point is—though of course my friend was perfectly right from the common sense, the reductively psychiatric, point of view—that the real world Karin inhabits isn't, to her sense, a loving place, nor is it even very real. By facial expression and body language (she can act with her Achilles tendons and her cervical vertebrae) the wonderful Harriet Anderson gives Karin depths and intensities of feeling, capacities for grace and sensuality, that are almost totally absent from everyday life which thus to her, and so far as we see through her eyes to us too, has the ultimate cruelty of emptiness. It is a world of shifting illusions, masks, shrinkings, falsities; by comparison the serene and expectant room-world is the real one, or if it isn't, it ought to be.

Yet Minus is there to keep us firmly reeling amid reality and to remind us that we too would probably be lost not only in pity but also in embarrassment and fear (Kafka's *Metamorphosis* comes reprovingly to mind). And it is through Minus' shocked eyes, after Karin has sent him away so that she can sink into what we expect to be catatonic withdrawal, that on his return we find her standing in the room's doorway inquiring about his Latin homework, brightly. It is a dreadful moment.

It's against our sense of continuing but utterly

unpredictable unravelling that the conversation between David and Martin takes place, with Martin bitterly telling his father-in-law that Karin has found and read his diary, and launching into an attack on him that we sense to be as much the outcome of Karin's rejection of his love as it is of his rage against her fate or David's carelessness ("weak and anxious" has been Karin's characterization of her husband to Minus a little earlier; how right, one feels, but how inadequate). Explicitly Martin claims to be disgusted by David's botanising on his daughter's psychological grave—his attempt to "fill [his] emptiness with Karin's extinction" and to find, somehow, a God in and through her plight, the God he "flirts with" in his novels. There is nothing exactly *wrong* with what Martin says, but it doesn't at all cover the complexities of judgment to which the film is subjecting David (we know about his weeping, for example, and his painful sense of inadequacy as man and writer, which Martin doesn't). And David is allowed to get back at Martin by pointing out that logically he should wish his wife dead; and that he can't, for professional reasons no doubt answering to temperamental needs he's not aware of, allow himself to doubt his own intentions—though that, of course, isn't quite fair to Martin, either. Yet David's claim, at the end of the sequence, that out of his emptiness a "love" has been born leaves us wondering about the genuineness, even the meaningfulness, of his discovery, and our puzzlement here carries through to the very last sequence (discussed below).

Karin's hyperacute ears hear thunder inaudible to Minus, and her gait as she walks up from the beach apparently to the cottage suggests that she is drifting into her other world. When Minus goes to look for her he can't find her where he evidently fears to, in the derelict room, nor elsewhere in the cottage. She has fled to an abandoned and rotting boat beached nearby and is lying hunched up in the dark hold. If the sun-facing room upstairs is for her God's antechamber, this dark hold is its counterpart, its hell. Abruptly she pulls her brother to her and with averted face desperately answers his sexual need in an act of love approaching self-destruction. Afterwards brother and sister sit appalled side by side as if mourning each other, vertiginously seen at the far end of the hold as if at the bottom of a hole or the end of a tunnel, the rain beats down and Bach cuts through again: the first time (apart from the credit titles) had marked Karin's exit from hope, when she read her father's diary; this marks her exit from anything but sporadic sanity; and the final repetition will announce her exit from the film and effectively from her own life. (Unlike most extra-diegetic music, the Bach here does

*not* invite us to sympathize with the characters' moods or situation; if anything it cuts against both their feelings and our expectations about what such music will do.) Now Karin is exhausted as well as ashamed: she tells her father when he and Martin come back (Martin goes to phone for an ambulance) that she wants to return to hospital and have no more treatments, since their only effect has been to make her live partly in the everyday world and partly in another, sometimes full of love and sometimes full of voices that tell her to do wrong.

The next-last—and climactic—sequence takes place in the old room, whither Karin has retreated after evading Martin. As he looks in, a transfigured Karin is, with reverent radiance, awaiting the God who will come out of the cupboard; and she insists that her husband kneel by her side and pray to Him too, while as a throbbing noise fills the sky the cupboard door swings slowly open and through the window we see the predatory shape of a helicopter landing vertically outside, though we are by now so engulfed by Karin's consciousness that the helicopter terrorizes us too into "seeing" it as a monstrous epiphany—a *deus ex machina* with, literally, a vengeance. Although we ourselves can't see anything come out of the cupboard, we know, as Karin's expression changes to horror and disgust and she starts screaming, that whatever it is is more real to her than anything, perhaps, could be to Martin or to David, closed away as they (of course necessarily) are from full human authenticity, the one by his rational outlook, the other by his need to fill his void with something edifying.

After Martin, his glinting glasses looking thicker than ever, has given her a sedative injection, David and Minus holding her down, Karin says it was a spider that came out of the cupboard, and it tried to penetrate her, its eyes cold and calm; Martin dismantles his hypodermic, his face blank. She has seen God. He is a spider. So, defeated, she puts on dark glasses for the first time in the film: "face to face" has been too much, and even in a mirror is more than she can bear. With Martin the helicopter bears her aloft, away, as Minus weeps and looks after them and Bach fills the sky.

The final episode, between David and his son, is puzzling. What the father *says* to the desperately upset Minus is clear enough (though it takes place indoors and not, as the published screenplay indicates, on the beach<sup>1</sup>): God is love, love is God, and if Karin is surrounded by human love, that can "help" her. The problem is whether we are being encouraged to believe that David's words are true even for him, let alone as a point of moral no less than narra-

tive repose and closure for the whole film. He is, after all, as we have seen and as he knows and confesses himself, an inveterate dodger of the truth; he very much wants to believe that "All is best, though we oft doubt"; and he very badly needs to "construct something upon which to rejoice."

Yet Bergman himself, once at any rate, seemed to endorse David. In an interview on Swedish television in 1963, he virtually repeated David's words about God being love and vice-versa, and appeared to give them his blessing. And he subtitled this film "certainly achieved," although one must immediately add that it is the first part of a trilogy of which the other two are *Winter Light* ("certainty unmasked") and *The Silence* ("God's silence—the negative impression"), and that in *Winter Light* Gunnar Björnstrand plays a priest who has lost his faith.

If we trust the tale rather than the artist, it looks as if it is the character, the very specifically created David, who is cheering himself up by trying (and for me, I must say, dismally failing) to turn his back on Karin's suffering. While it's true that the film ends with a close-up of Minus saying "Father spoke to me" and the suggestion that Karin's disintegration has at any rate resulted in father and son communicating for the first time and establishing a genuine relationship, nevertheless one doesn't have to be a cynic, nor even a skeptic, to feel that the price has been atrociously high—that a universe based on this kind of moral calculus would be a fair imitation of hell. It looks to me, also (though here I must be tentative), as though Björnstrand's acting here exquisitely conveys, by its shaky self-assertion and stony immobility of countenance, that David is being sincere enough but only to the limits of his not very great capacity. Precisely that: no less, no more. *Il faut tenter de vivre* as the poet says; and if one can only go on trying by constructing a suspect ideology of Love out of someone else's anguish, that is arguably better than just giving up. But what abides, for me, is Karin's openness to whatever life (or God) brings her, and her courage in seeing the thing through, face to face.

<sup>1</sup> *Three Films by Ingmar Bergman*, translated by Paul Britten Austin, Grove Press, New York, 1967, pp. 59-61. It is worth adding that Bergman, to judge by the prints I have seen, dropped the notion of having David tear up and burn his novel, towards the end (v. p. 55).

C O N T R I B U T O R S

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